

## **The LibriVox NaNoWriMo Novel 2006 (part 2)**

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# ***The Mystery (part 2)***

A novel written by LibriVox volunteers in the month of November 2006.  
The chapter text and their accompanying audio recordings are in the public domain.

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<http://librivox.org/the-librivox-nanowrimo-novel-2006/>

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## **[Chapters 01-16](#)**

### **Chapter 17 (written by Juho Fröjd)**

Years of training had taught Tracey to conceal her outward emotions, and as a result her face didn't falter for even a second from the look of confusion. Inside, on the other hand, she was triumphant. Finally she had located what she had searched for. All the elaborate lures that she had set up before had failed, but at last she had managed to draw the Red out of hiding.

"The Red?" she asked, with a perfectly masqueraded voice of confusion and uncertainty.

"Eventually, you will know, but not now" The Red answered.

Tracey let her head drop, signaling her frustration and acknowledgment.

"Will you contact Trevor for me?" The Red continued.

"I will, just.. just let me gather my thoughts for a while."

"Certainly. I will return in an hour," she said in a gentle tone. As the Red exited the room, Tracey stood and pressed her fingers on her throat. Instantly, she heard the subtle \*beeb\* in her ear, that signaled a successful satellite connection to GLOBAL HQ. Then, with a perfectly trained technique of vibrating her vocal cords without moving her lips, or making a sound, she uttered "This is Top, authorization Gamma Charlie Oh Niner. Eliminate T, I repeat— eliminate T."

A black van pulled by the curb outside a hotel. For a while it idled, until the driver switched off the engine and got out. He was dressed in full black combat camouflage, bulletproof vest and a military type utility belt. He flipped his cell phone open and hit Answer.

"Sgt. Reynolds here."

He listened for a while, without saying a word, then closed the phone, dropped it to the ground and with a violent thrust of his leg, crushed it to pieces. He banged the side of the van with his fist and said: "Move out, we have authorization."

The van's back doors opened, and men in matching combat outfits burst out, each carrying a H&K MP35 sub-machine gun. With a silent efficiency, they each checked their weapons, put on their balaclavas and combat helmets and proceeded to the hotel.

"Trevor, wake up! Come on, get up!"

Hazel was shaking Trevor vigorously as he opened his eyes, still too much asleep to understand what was going on. As his brain cleared the fog around his mind, he noticed that Hazel was up, fully dressed —a gun in her hand. The gun got Trevor's mind to clear up in an instant and he jumped up.

"Whats wrong?" he asked, now very aware of his surroundings.

"We are in trouble" she hissed back. "Here, take this."

She threw Trevor a fully loaded automatic pistol. Trevor had to fight the urge to ask more questions, but he realized there wasn't time for uncertainty. He held up the gun, checked the clip and loaded a bullet into the chamber. Meanwhile, Hazel had moved the bed against the hotel room door, covered the windows and hunched herself in a corner. "Now" she whispered, "we wait."

Outside, the men made little noise as they progressed towards their target. Only the slight sound of their guns hitting against their belts made their presence known. Two of the men took positions behind the hotel room door, and rigged the door with a explosive. Meanwhile, three others made their descent along the hotel wall along ropes secured on the roof. Other guests checked in at the hotel had been quietly evacuated, so no-one witnessed these men and their actions. Finally, as they all were at their designated positions, their radios crackled to life with the word "Go!"

Seconds ticked by as Trevor and Hazel nervously waited for the inevitable. Their eyes were closed, and their hands were on their ears to avoid the effects of flashbangs. Tick, tock, tick, tock, the clocks inside their heads echoed. Tick, tock tick, to... BOOM. The windows shattered, and the door flew in, followed immediately by a bang and a bright white flash as the flashbangs exploded. Laser sights glowed through the smoke in the air as the combat uniformed men searched for their target. Hazel was up in a heartbeat, firing her gun at the nearest assailant. The man dropped as the bullet hit him. Hazel spun around looking for the next target, but as she did this, her body was covered with the bright red dots of the laser sights. "Take her down!" crackled the earpieces of the attackers. And so they did. They squeezed the triggers of their guns, and as the bullets sprouted out, everything just seemed to stop for a moment. Then the bullets hit her, dead on with full power. Trevor watched in horror as the bullets ripped through her body, making their deadly way into her vital organs. Trevor let out an almost animal-like roar, as he fired his automatic weapon at the assailants. So fierce was his attack that the men near him were down before they even realized what hit them. In an instant, he was out the door and on his way. "Do not pursue! Do not pursue!" roared the attackers' earpieces. As the men lowered their weapons, Sgt. Reynolds entered the room. "We will get our chance another time." As efficiently as they had appeared, the men left, leaving only the shattered body of Hazel behind them.

For hours, Trevor hid in the bushes nearby the hotel. He had seen the men leave, but couldn't gather the strength to move a muscle. The image of Hazel's body being struck by bullets kept reappearing in his head. Finally, he was able to get himself moving. His mind was telling him to get as far as possible from the hotel, but his heart wouldn't let him. He couldn't abandon Hazel. As he entered the room, his heart sunk. The first glimpse at Hazel's body told everything. She was dead. Nothing could have saved her from the hail of bullets her body had suffered. Trevor knelt besides her body, tears running wildly down his cheeks. Something in her face caught his eyes. Her face was no longer controlled by her training, and as Trevor lay his eyes on her now serene face, he finally was able to see what had looked so familiar about her. It wasn't the face of Hazel Brown anymore, nor the face of the Travel Agent. It was the face of the woman he loved. The face of Rebecca. A new kind of pain rose from inside. The pain of finding something you had lost before, only to lose it again. As the first rays of the morning sun made their way into the room, Trevor lay down his head on her cold chest and wept.

## **Chapter 18 (written by Betsie Bush)**

Wiping away the tears, Trevor suddenly realized that he would need to get himself together. As deep as his grief ran, he knew that he had no choice but to leave the hotel as quickly and carefully as possible. Hazel, or Rebecca, rather, had been counting on him to help the Order take down the GLOBAL database; he could not waste time by being caught at a gruesome crime scene.

Hastily surveying the room, Trevor picked up some shattered laptop computer pieces. He was disappointed to find it had been shot to bits in the firefight, but decided it was probably for the best. *I suppose it wouldn't have been of any use with everything being monitored by GLOBAL, anyway*, he thought to himself.

Trevor had had the manuscript on the floor under the table with him last night, and it remained intact in its yellow envelope. He gathered it up with a few other non-technology items and stuffed them into his duffle bag: clean underwear, toothbrush. Despite the grim scene, Trevor couldn't help grinning to himself as he thought, *I wonder if GLOBAL has figured out a way to keep track of how many times a day I brush my teeth? Maybe there's even a mini-GPS in my toothbrush*. He bitterly tossed the toothbrush aside.

After slipping down a back staircase and out of the building, he headed for a quiet Manhattan branch of the New York Public Library. He still didn't know whom he could trust, but he needed to lay low until he decided on his next move, and a public library was always a good place to get lost in anonymity. Finding an empty carrel at the back of the library, out of view of the rest of the room, he brought out the manuscript. Setting aside the envelope and the thin cardboard backing that had been used to support the stack of typewritten, onion skin pages, he began leafing through them and rereading parts hoping to piece together some of his thoughts.

*How could Hazel have been Rebecca? He must have imagined the resemblance. Rebecca had died. Hadn't she?*

When he had asked Hazel about Rebecca Sharp, she managed to elude the question and gave him a vague enough answer that he wasn't sure what she knew. This hadn't surprised him at the time, as Hazel had already established that she wasn't offering up any information. He knew he needed to put it out of his mind for now. There was time to grieve

later, or re-grieve if necessary. His life was in danger; he needed to focus on his mission.

After several undisturbed hours without any new leads from the manuscript, he stacked the pages and slid them back into their envelope. He had forgotten to put the thin sheet of cardboard in behind the pages, and as he reached for it, he noticed a corner curling back slightly. He absent-mindedly picked at it, like nervously peeling the label off a beer bottle before tossing the empty bottle in the trash. He wasn't surprised to find that the board peeled easily apart. But between the layers of paper pulp that made up the sheet of thin cardboard, Trevor was startled to find a bit of writing on the inside of the board. Shapes formed themselves into groups of what Trevor supposed were words, but he couldn't read the meaning of the words. Running his fingers lightly across the surface of the writing, the parallel textured ridges told him that he was holding a fragment of papyrus.

Prazak had used the manuscript as a cover for the *real* clue! Trevor immediately knew where he needed to go next. Luckily he hadn't headed up to Cornell, so he was already in the right city. Hailing a taxi, Trevor headed to Broadway and 114th Street.

Trevor had heard Professor Prazak talking about his work on translating languages written on ancient papyrus, but, while Trevor had been interested in Prazak's professional work on codes and ciphers, he had not paid much attention to this hobby of collecting and translating ancient texts. Trevor did not imagine that Prazak had accidentally mixed this fragment in with the manuscript. The professor may have been scatter-brained, but he did not misplace valuable relics.

While spending time chatting with Prazak, Trevor had gotten to know some of the other students who admired this professor's work and hobbies. Shanna had seemed rather unremarkable the few times he had run into her outside of Prazak's office, but they had spent some time talking while they waited for the professor to return for office hours. She had also been a friend of Rebecca's, and Trevor had seen Shanna occasionally when she and Rebecca had studied together. Though they had not kept in touch, Trevor knew from the professor that Shanna had gone on to study rare book and paper conservation in Vienna and was now working as an assistant in the papyrology lab at Columbia University, which held one of the few specialized papyrology collections in the world.

Trevor navigated his way through small crowds of students on the commons in front of the university library building. Once inside, he headed toward the elevators, as they call them in the States, and, lost in thought, stepped onto the nearest open elevator.

"Where's your up?" asked the young man who held the door open for Trevor.

"Pardon?" Trevor took a mental double take as the chinchilla started kicking up the dust in his brain.

"Are you going up?" the man repeated impatiently with finger posed over the elevator buttons. "What floor?"

"Oh, yes. 8th floor please," Trevor replied, still unsure if he had heard the man right the first time or not.

Trevor wouldn't have thought twice about mishearing if the phrase *Where's your up?* hadn't triggered something in his brain. But where had he heard it before? Trevor examined the stranger with his peripheral vision, but noticed nothing unusual about the man's behavior or appearance. Perhaps in his 30s, the man stood casually facing the front of the elevator with book bag slung over his shoulder. *Probably a graduate student heading for some serious studying*, Trevor reassured himself but was still uneasy.

As the man stepped off the elevator at the 4th floor, Trevor allowed himself to relax a bit from his hyper-alert state but sent the chinchilla on a search through his personal memories, just in case. On the 8th floor Trevor took the opportunity to gaze out of the expansive window toward the city. There was no hurry now. He was lost in a huge city. GLOBAL couldn't find him here. He had time to listen to the chinchilla.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Shhh," hisses a six-year-old Tracey as she and her twin sneak into a spare bedroom in Aunt Lydia's sprawling, 1970s-style house.

With the grown-ups being so serious, perhaps it was another funeral or maybe just a regular family gathering, the children are getting antsy. Hide-and-go-seek with the cousins is exactly what they need while the adults talk and linger over drinks in the dining room.

Trevor heads toward the bed with its heap of overcoats and wraps where the guests have piled them.

"Tracey, bury me under the coats. Then you hide in the closet," he whispers, delighted with the idea of this sneaky hiding place.

He burrows under the heavy wool and fur coats as Tracey arranges them over him. She dashes to the closet just as they hear footsteps on the wood floor in the hallway outside of the room. Tense with anticipation, Trevor tries holding his breath so as not to be discovered too soon.

Footsteps enter the room, and the bed sinks on one side as a grown-up, not a cousin, sits down--the quiet rattle of the Bakelite phone on the bedside table--the whirring of the rotary dial. Then, Uncle Geoffrey's muffled voice.

"Where's your up?"

Pause.

"I know where Top is, but where's *your* Up?"

Pause.

"Blue will cover while I'm attending to family business. But I still need to be in contact with your Upper."

Pause.

"Alright. Fair enough. Good-bye."

Shrieks of childish laughter pour from the closet as cousin Julie discovers Tracey's hiding place. The girls pounce on the mound of coats, and Trevor erupts from the pile giggling and jumping on the bed. Uncle Geoffrey, still in the room, joins in the laughter.

\* \* \* \* \*

After hearing an extremely abridged version of Trevor's adventures, Shanna took the cardboard from Trevor and carefully examined it through a small magnifying glass over her workbench. She tucked her graying hair behind her ears as she gently brushed away some debris from the surface.

"I'll need to remove some of the paste that's holding the papyrus in place on the board. Looks like Prazak did a good job though. He even used acid-free cardboard," Shanna grinned as she began dabbing the surface with a fine paintbrush from a small water container. "I'm not so good with Middle Eastern languages, but Dr. Grant or Gary will probably be able to translate it for you."

Trevor watched as she continued her delicate work for which he knew he never would have had the patience.

Shanna suddenly raised her head. "Ah, you have a palimpsest on your hands here," she said knowingly.

"Really?" Trevor responded trying to hide his interest. "Can you make out what was written before?"

"Well..." Shanna nudged the fibers of the fragment with a thin metal spatula. "No, not really. But it is clear that the under-text has been washed off to make way for the new text. That's rather rare with papyrus though. It was so cheap to make that no one bothered to reuse it. This is seen more often with animal based documents like parchment or vellum."

"Anything else you can tell me about it?" Trevor inquired. He had suspected that there was more to the papyrus fragment than just what appeared on the surface.

"Hmmm," Shanna hesitated. "Yes. It's a forgery and not a very good one."

"Yeah? How can you tell?" Trevor could no longer hold back his excitement.

"Well, besides its having been overwritten, the writing is in the wrong direction. The text

is written across the vertical fibers, and the side with the horizontal fibers is blank. The ink isn't right either." Shanna shot Trevor a quizzical glance making sure that he was following her.

Trevor nodded.

"And there's something else," she continued.

"What?" Trevor urged her.

"Let me show you," Shanna replied and reached for a light box from a shelf over her workbench. "Come on."

Carrying the papyrus on the cardboard in one hand and the lamp in the other, she led Trevor into a small closet-like room, closed the door, plugged in the lamp, and switched off the main light. The tiny room glowed blue in the light from the UV lamp. The shape of a cross and some Latin words stood out clearly against the pale papyrus background.

"See what I mean?" Shanna concluded.

## **Chapter 19 (written by Laura M D )**

Trevor looked in astonishment at the strange symbol that appeared so vividly under the light. The cross had no significance to him. It was a simple, definite design, however it was the Latin words following that intrigued him. Having no knowledge of Latin whatsoever, he turned to Shanna. She smiled.

"It's the motto for the Knights of Malta."

Trevor nodded. He sat back in his chair, wiping his hot face with his cool hands.

"Oh, and there's something else underneath this."

Trevor sat back up. Shanna quickly read what was written underneath the cross. As she read he could see a sharp stab of fear fly across her face. She gulped loudly.

"Trevor..." she whispered under her breath.

Trevor became fidgety.

"What does it say?"

She looked at him with scared eyes, before pushing the papyrus towards him. He gasped as he read what was scrawled underneath.

*I'm being held hostage. Help.*

\* \* \*

Red looked at the bleary-eyed Tracey as she stared out the window. She felt pangs of sympathy for this distraught girl.

"Shall I make you something to drink, a cup of coffee, maybe?"

Tracey nodded and Red slipped out of the room. Once the door was firmly closed, Tracey

quickly engaged in a satellite conversation via earpiece to GLOBAL HQ.

"This is Top, authorization Gamma Charlie Oh Niner. How did the elimination of T go?"

The reply was quick.

"Unsuccessful. Accomplice killed, but T managed to get away. We do, however, have news on his sister. She escaped. Repeat, Tracey Aimes has escaped from captivity."

The news was shocking to Top. She knew Tracey was smart, but she didn't realise that she was smart enough to escape the clutches of GLOBAL hostage-takers. They were the best; they were trained, just like her. She had been trained in the art of impersonation, of deceiving others. Just as she had done over the past weeks. She had followed Tracey, picking up the subtleties of her accent, her relationship with her husband and with her children. As a master in the art of disguise, it caused her no distress to kidnap Tracey and take her place. She was cunning, she knew. But when the Order had decided to kidnap the *real* Tracey, she had already cemented her disguise. She had no choice but to become Tracey.

Now she just wondered how Tracey had escaped. She was just a normal person, nothing special. But she must have outwitted the people at GLOBAL. And that wasn't an entirely simple thing to do. Top knew what kind of security there was. Tracey had been given drugs to knock her out, and she had been tied up. She was being guarded by hundreds of people. She would have had to have several key codes to get past any of the doors. The possibility of this bewildered Top. It was impossible, or next to impossible.

*There must be someone undercover working at GLOBAL headquarters.*

It was the only logical explanation. That, or Tracey had been trained in the art of escaping the clutches of the best hostage-takers in the world. And she severely doubted that.

\* \* \*

*They have taken him hostage!* The words echoed throughout Trevor's mind. He had been there. He could have helped him. He thought the GLOBAL agents hadn't come to Professor Prazak's office. But he had been wrong. They were there the whole time, probably pointing guns at the Professor, forcing him to act as normally as possible.

*I'm being held hostage.*

The words kept flying in and out of Trevor's mind. He had been there, and could have helped the man. He could have kicked himself for not nosing around the office more. *The Professor must be quick* Trevor thought to himself *for writing that on the papyrus knowing as well as anything that I'd study it and find it.* What he'd not counted on was the day wasted between receiving the documents back and the actual study of the papyrus.

"We have to go!" He motioned to Shanna. He grabbed up the documents, forcefully placed them in his pocket, and ran out the door. Shanna followed him, with a look of confusion on her face.

"Where are we going?" she asked breathlessly, following him down several sets of stairs.

"To Professor Prazak's office."

"If he's been kidnapped, he probably won't still be there. His kidnappers would have ensured that."

"I don't care!" Trevor screamed back. "He's a decent man, and he doesn't need to be involved in all this nonsense."

As they raced out onto the street, Trevor hailed a taxi and hurled his body in.

"To the New York University department of Linguistics."

The taxi pulled off, leaving Shanna alone on the street. Trevor's mind was racing with questions. Would the professor still be there? Would the people holding him hostage have killed him? What does the professor have that anyone would have wanted? *Apart from a connection with me.*

Trevor's thoughts were interrupted by the taxi driver calling his name.

"New York University, linguistics department, did you say?"

Trevor replied, absent-mindedly, "Aha."

Suddenly he realized.

*How did the taxi driver know my name?*

## **Chapter 20 (written by Zachary Brewster-Geisz)**

The driver turned onto West 34th Street.

"Why are you turning?" asked Trevor.

"Is faster!" shouted the taxi driver. "Is very very good, you see!"

"NYU Linguistics is on Broadway," said Trevor. "We don't need to turn here."

"Is good, is good!"

Trevor swallowed. Not only does this guy know my name, he thought, but now he has a foreign accent all of a sudden. "All right," he said, "let me out here."

"No, no, we go to NYU!" the taxi driver laughed. "Customer always right!"

"The customer says we stop!" Trevor banged on the safety glass. "Now!"

The driver didn't answer as he sped through a yellow light and turned onto the Long Island Expressway. Trevor didn't know much about New York, but he was reasonably sure that a Manhattan university would not be found on Long Island.

All right, he thought, assess the situation. The Professor's been kidnapped. This taxi driver

is most likely kidnapping me. No way out unless I open the door and tumble onto the highway. How can I distract him...

Inspiration struck. The sloth! If I can just get him to look around--

On a whim, Trevor called out, "Where's your up?"

The driver turned around. That face! Trevor was momentarily stunned by the resemblance to

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He was in a room. There was a bare bulb in the ceiling, a door on the far wall. He was sitting in a chair. There was a glass of water on a small table near him.

Trevor blinked. What the hell just happened? He was weak, as though waking from a long nap. He was in no shape to even reach out for the water, let alone explore his surroundings. Best to just wait and get his bearings...

He didn't have to wait long. The door opened, and though the light blinded him momentarily, he could tell from the silhouette that it was the taxi driver.

"Are you all right?" he asked in perfect English.

"How did I get here?" Trevor croaked.

The driver chuckled. "You think you're the only one who's discovered the sloth?" He remained at the door, careful to keep his distance. "That, and some chloroform administered while you were entranced. I admit, if I hadn't surprised you, you might have gotten me first. We know you're quite skilled. But really, Trevor, would it be a good idea to hypnotize someone who's driving down a New York expressway at eighty miles per hour?"

"Surprise," Trevor murmured.

"Yes," the driver continued, "Surprise. You surprised me, too, of course -- 'where's your up,' indeed! But I knew who you were, Trevor, and you didn't know who I was..."

He stepped forward, into the light, revealing his face, the face which had started this whole ridiculous adventure, with nothing but a bequest.

Trevor's mouth dropped open. "Grayson?"

Gerhardt Grayson nodded. "You should call me Grey." He smiled. "Grayson's not my real name, anyhow. Or perhaps I should say, it's one of my many real names."

"What have you done with Professor Prazak?"

Grey laughed, a booming, deep-throated laugh that seemed incongruous in his thin frame. "He's fine. Really, Trevor, you should be worried about someone else."

An ache in Trevor's stomach. Fear? "What do you mean?"

"Heh." Grey held out his right hand, and gestured to the door with the other. "Let's take a walk."

\*\*\*

Who was the mole?

Top paced her cathedral-vaulted cell. Who could it be? Who could have let Tracey out? The Uppers, Middles, and Loweres didn't know who Top was -- internal security -- but Top made damn sure she knew all of them. The Loweres and Middles didn't have the access. They could be eliminated. (And wouldn't it have been wonderful to "eliminate" Fulvia, if she had the excuse, that crazy loose cannon -- but no, concentrate on the task at hand.) So it had to be an Upper. But who?

She grimaced. Of all days. Red was in her hands! True, technically she was Red's captive, but that was a minor detail. A few well-placed blows, or even a strangling if Top was feeling whimsical, and the Order would be finished. But now... she couldn't destroy GLOBAL's rival, only to face a challenge from within. She had only remained in power this long by keeping her friends close, and her enemies closer...

There was one solution, only. Escape.

\*

Trevor and Grey walked down a long, white corridor, fluorescent light streaming from the high ceiling. Bach's "The Well-Tempered Clavier" (played on a harpsichord, by the sound of it) floated in from below, oddly. They passed several doors on the left side, none on the right.

"Where are we?" Trevor demanded.

Grey sighed. "Southern Connecticut, I think," he said. "It's really quite boring, actually."

Trevor shook his head. "I mean, what is this place? This... complex, or--"

"Oh, that?" Grey said. "I'm not about to give the game away, Trevor. You know too much already."

"I don't know a thing," muttered Trevor.

"Well, true," Grey admitted. "A great man once said, there are known knowns -- things we know that we know. There are known unknowns -- things we know we don't know. There are unknown unknowns, things we don't know that we don't know."

" 'Great man'?" scoffed Trevor. "That was--"

"He forgot one thing," interrupted Grey. "There are also unknown knowns... things we don't know that we know."

He stopped Trevor, and stared intently at him.

"You know more than you think, Trevor."

The hallway had changed from an antiseptic white modernity to a cave-like stone. No, not a cave... a fort. Trevor looked around, momentarily disoriented. There was the hallway, several yards behind them -- he had completely missed the transition. They were standing

next to an enormous steel door.

"For instance, Trevor," Grey said, his voice dropping to a whisper barely louder than the Bach that somehow still surrounded them, "you know that you are now in Connecticut, or at least somewhere near New York, because if I had taken you anywhere farther, you would be a lot hungrier. You know that Hazel Brown was Rebecca Sharp..." Trevor's breath caught, and he coughed. Grey looked down, and continued, "and let me say that I miss her, too." He looked back up. "And most importantly, you know your sister."

Trevor stared at him, and rushed forward. "What have you done with Tracey?" he shouted.

Grey smiled. "I pray you, take your hands from my throat," he recited as he sucker-punched Trevor in the stomach. Trevor reeled backwards, gasping. "Sorry about that. Control yourself, Trevor! Tracey is fine -- both of her."

He stood in front of the door, arms folded. Trevor gaped at him. "Both?"

Grey nodded. "We had her in a cathedral in Rome. The Order just loves old buildings; alas, the best we could come up with here in the colonies was a retrofitted fort left over from the American War for Independence... but in any case. As I said, we had her in a cathedral in Rome, or thought we did. That is, until our mole in GLOBAL, a sadly low-ranking security officer, was assigned to her case, and discovered that GLOBAL had her! So if they had your sister, then who did we have? We don't know. In fact, for all we know, GLOBAL's Tracey may be the impostor! In any case, we secured this second Tracey from GLOBAL's clutches. Believe me when I say she's better off with us. You met Fulvia, did you not? And now the second Tracey is also on her way to Rome... just as you shall be."

Trevor's shoulders sagged. "WorldCon, again?"

Grey frowned, offended. "What's the matter? We may be a strange, inexplicably unknown organization using and abusing your family, friends, and colleagues for our own nefarious ends... but at least we know how to run a profitable airline!" He grabbed the steel door's handle and twisted it clockwise. With a loud clank, it unlatched, and Grey pulled it open to reveal a clear, grassy field. "In this case, however," he shouted over a high-pitched whine, "I recommend a private jet." He escorted Trevor out the door and around a corner. They were next to an airstrip, where a DC-10 in WorldCon livery stood, a staircase leading to its cockpit. Dazed, Trevor didn't argue as Grey hustled him up the stairs.

They walked into the main cabin, which was decked out like a plush living room, complete with entertainment center, mini-bar, and what looked like a Mac so advanced even Apple didn't have it yet. Grey gestured to a set of standard first-class airline seats in the rear of the cabin. "We'll need to sit there for takeoff," he said, "but afterward we can feel free to roam about the cabin."

"Is there Net access on that thing?" asked Trevor, gesturing at the computer.

"Of course," said Grey. "Planning to catch up on your listening?"

Trevor shot him a look. They sat down. Grey pointedly buckled his seat belt. After a moment, Trevor did so also. The jet began to accelerate down the runway, pressing them back in their seats.

"So what do you want from me?" Trevor asked. "Obviously, I'm coming with you, otherwise you'll kill Tracey. But what do you want from me?"

Grey looked askance at him. "We would never kill Tracey! We need you to figure out which Tracey is which!" He smiled at Trevor's openmouth stare. "Yes, you see, we know that the false Tracey is someone high up in GLOBAL's hierarchy. We don't know how high. But we do know that she should have the knowledge we need to take down GLOBAL's systems, once and for all. Find your sister, we let her go. Find your sister's impostor's secret, we let you go. Or, if you prefer, you help us eliminate GLOBAL."

Trevor nodded. "Which is what Hazel -- Rebecca -- asked me to do."

For the first time there was something like kindness in Grey's eyes. "If you won't do it for us... consider doing it for her."

The jet soared past Long Island, and over the blue Atlantic.

## **Chapter 21 (written by Maria Morabe)**

Trevor found himself staring out of the window as the plane flew high above the ocean. He felt no compulsion to use the computer and go online. Especially not with Grey watching him. But that was not the only reason for his hesitation. For the first time in a very long while, he allowed himself to feel tired: tired of everything that had ever meant anything to him. He pressed his forehead against the cool glass and stared at the water below.

Becky had loved the ocean. He remembered the trip they'd taken long ago. It had been early springtime then, and the flowers were just starting to bloom. They had gone to Stanford, mainly because Becky had research to do. Of course, in the end, they'd hardly gotten any research done. Trevor smiled at the memory. Becky had decided she wanted to stay outside and watch the waves instead.

It seemed like it had taken place so long ago. It had been what? Twenty years ago? Trevor sighed. Maybe it had happened long ago. But not so long ago that it had been forgotten. Everything had changed since the plane crash. Trevor shuddered at the memory. They hadn't even had a proper funeral for the victims.

And now, she was gone again. He could hardly believe he hadn't recognized her. But he hadn't. He took a deep breath. He was starting to lose his composure. He felt a hand on the back of his arm and started upright. His forehead felt cold from where it had been pressed against the glass.

"There's where they are," said Grey, pointing out of the window. Trevor stared, wondering if he'd fallen asleep. They were flying over land now. He could partially see the cathedral Grey was pointing to. It towered above the other buildings. It was old. And that was basically all he could see.

A few minutes later, they had landed at what seemed to be a private air field in the middle of a veritable ancient ruin. Trevor stood up, his legs shaking a little. Trevor remained silent as they disembarked, his mind blank except for one thought: If you won't do it for us... consider doing it for her. He wished life would just go back to being simple. No organizations with hidden agendas. Nothing.

Grey was saying something. Trevor looked at him and realized the man was speaking into a mic. "... arrived. Repeat, I have Trevor. Has the second Tracey arrived?"

"Negative, sir," came the reply. "She should be here soon.... Reynolds is bringing her in."

"Good. Let me know when she gets here."

"Yes, sir."

Grey turned to Trevor. "Follow me. There's someone you should see."

Having no choice, Trevor followed the other man up a few moss-covered steps into a large courtyard. When Grey had said cathedral, Trevor had assumed he'd meant just that: a cathedral. But it seemed that he was wrong. This was no mere cathedral. After all, how many cathedrals had their own courtyard and landing strip?

The rumble of another plane approaching pulled him from his ruminations, and he looked back, expecting to see the aircraft landing. It wasn't, however, and continued flying overhead. It was then that Trevor noticed it wasn't a WorldCon plane. Grey noticed that Trevor wasn't following. He gestured toward the old building. "Come. There will be time for wondering later."

#

Professor Andel Prazak paced in his cell. He didn't know where he was. He didn't know how he'd gotten there or what time it was. The only thing he did know was that they'd taken him for a reason. They wanted his skills, his abilities. And no, he didn't think he was deluding himself in assuming they wouldn't kill him. They wanted him alive. Now... who exactly were "they?"

He could hear the footsteps of the person in the cell next to him. Judging by their lightness, they were the footsteps of a woman. Occasionally, he would hear snatches of conversation... or at least half a conversation. He knew for certain that only one person was in the cell next to his. And that one person had been moved there only recently.

*Trevor... what have you gotten me into?* he thought. In the other cell, the woman had started talking again. This time there was mention of "T" and "Top." Perhaps the poor soul was losing her mind?

The door opened. Light flooded the cells. What kind of person kept a dungeon? Prazak peered at the newcomers. One looked familiar.... Trevor?

Trevor did not seem to notice him and just kept looking into the other cell. Prazak wondered what was so interesting.

"Tracey?" Trevor's voice was hoarse. "Tracey? You okay?"

The man standing next to Trevor cleared his throat. Prazak saw the look of consternation pass across Trevor's face as he spun around and faced the man. Some sort of unspoken conversation passed between them.

"Trevor! I'm so glad to see you!" It was the woman's voice. Trevor looked back at her. To Prazak, his eyes were wild, frightened, like a young child that only recently lost its mother.

There was something false about the way she spoke that put Prazak on edge. Trevor seemed not to notice it, however. He seemed to have withdrawn into his own private world, surrounded only by his thoughts. Prazak could see the change that had been wrought in his personality and wondered what had caused it. Gone was the normally cheerful, confident Trevor. In his place was a silent, brooding man.

Prazak sighed. The ratio of things he didn't know to things he did know was a lot to a little. It distressed him terribly.

#

"Reynolds is here, sir," said the voice in Grey's earpiece. "He's got the other woman."

"Good," Grey muttered. He watched as Trevor stood in front of the woman who was or wasn't his sister. In a way, he pitied Trevor. His task would be a hard one. Not only his task, but perhaps the rest of his life as well. "Tell him to bring her down."

"Yes, sir."

#

Trevor heard footsteps coming down the stairs he had only recently traversed himself. The stairs down to the dungeon. He almost laughed at the thought. A dungeon! And one that was being used, at that. Who would have imagined it?

The door burst open and his sister entered. Or, he thought she was his sister. In any case, it was a woman who resembled Tracey. She was followed by a man in an unidentifiable, military-style uniform. It was this man who caught Trevor's attention. Reynolds, was it? The name meant nothing to him. But the man's stance, his face, were so familiar.

"Here she is, sir. The flight was a bit rough, but we made it."

Trevor wracked his memory. Where had he heard that voice before?

"Thank you, Sergeant Reynolds. How are your men?"

"Fine, sir." He glanced at Trevor, seeming oddly nervous. "The Brown girl -"

Trevor didn't give him a chance to finish his sentence. He finally remembered. Reynolds had been the one in charge of the soldiers that had shot at him, had killed Becky. He launched himself at Reynolds, thrusting his sister (if the woman was really his sister) aside.

All coherent thoughts left him. He was overcome by the animal need to hit. To strike and cause injury. He felt his fist hit hard muscle and didn't care about the fact that he was a middle-aged, not particularly physical man or that his opponent was much younger and stronger than he was. He didn't care about anything.

He was only vaguely aware of a cell door scraping open, of Grey's voice shouting from a distance. Footsteps resounded against the stone floor and people flooded into the dungeon. He felt arms wrap around him, trying to pull him away. He heard what sounded like a gunshot and felt blood spattered on his body. There were shouts all around him.

He gradually became aware that his hands were wrapped around a man's throat. He squeezed. Rebecca... Hazel... He felt like a knight sworn to avenge his beloved's death.

Someone struck the back of his head. Spots danced before his eyes, but his grip remained strong. Another blow, this time to his stomach. He released his grip a little, enough for Reynolds to push him off slightly and gasp for breath. Trevor let out an animal yell and reached for the man again. At the same time, he heard a woman scream. A man, Grey, he supposed, let out a warning. He turned around and saw the cell door ajar. The woman who had been its sole occupant stood before him, a knife in her hand. Before he could say a word, before he could move, she'd struck.

He managed to deflect the blow so that it missed his heart, but the pain that accompanied its savage slide into his body was intense. He dropped to his knees slowly. In his dimming vision, he could see the woman take a few steps backwards, her eyes bright... with triumph?

"Reynolds! Are you okay?" he heard Grey asking. He felt somebody's hand touch his and moved his head. It was his sister, he was fairly sure. It was the Tracey that hadn't just tried to kill him, anyway.

"Someone get a doctor!" Was that Professor Prazak's voice he heard? What was he doing here?

"Take that woman back into her cell and guard her!" It was Grey again. Trevor tried to see what was going on. The effort of trying to sit up was too much for his battered body. He fell back against the stone floor. Pain stabbed through his head as it came in contact with the ground. The world spun itself into darkness....

The last thing he heard, before he became completely unconscious, was a conversation. He heard Tracey's voice (he supposed it was her voice) saying, "Who is she?"

Grey replied, "An enemy."

And then a muffled sob, followed by, "What do you want from us?"

Grey's reply was soft. "Your help."

"Why?"

A tear splashed onto his hand. And for a while, he stopped feeling or hearing.

## **Chapter 22 (written by Kathleen Gatcliffe)**

Trevor found himself at a sidewalk café, perhaps in Paris; it looked exactly like a vintage postcard he had picked up at a flea market over the summer. The chairs around him were all empty, except for one at the next table, on which sat a small man in a full beard and a top hat. The gentleman was scribbling in a small leather bound notebook with a quill. Trevor noticed that the man's mustache was curled and waxed. Then he noticed that everything was sepia toned, even his own hands. He snorted.

No wonder it looks like an old postcard, he thought. I'm not even going to try to figure this one out. There was a large cup of coffee in front of him, and he grabbed hold, hoping the warmth would steady him.

"I say, sir," said a jolly female voice beside him, and he looked up to see an impoverished flower girl, dressed something like Eliza Doolittle, but with the same face his sister had as a teen. The girl was holding out a large red blossom that was wrinkled like a cerebrum.

"Fancy a bit of coxcomb?" she asked.

Trevor gaped at the sudden flash of color, but she tossed it away, and it seemed to disappear in thin air. She rummaged in the large wicker basket slung over her arm. "Let's see," she said. "Cat got your tongue? I have just the thing for you. Some roses? No ... Baby's breath? Nasty stuff that, soft and fuzzy, but too small to make an impression on your ladylove. Now that's a girl that wants for lilies."

She dug deeper. "Aha, just the thing." She pulled a wriggling gray creature from the depths and plopped it on the table. "It's one of them rabbit-type things," she said. "A chinchilla. And a damned nuisance if you ask me."

The creature crept towards Trevor and stared up at him with beady black eyes of overwhelming cuteness. Trevor stammered, "How is it that it's in color?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about," the young girl said. She turned and flounced away.

"That's a fine animal you have there," said the man at the next table. "It must be of great comfort to you. Why if I had a beast like that, I would write works of greatness, not the penny dreadfuls that pay the bills."

Trevor looked at his chinchilla. It was sniffing at his coffee cup.

"The name's Sexton, Sexton Hawke," the man said, now standing at Trevor's elbow. "I say, it's tremendous good luck to find a fellow Englishman in this beastly country. I'm a writer, you see, I take it you're one, too."

Trevor shook his head. "No," he said slowly, trying to remember where he had heard this man's name before. "I'm a reader. For Librivox."

"Librivox, eh?" the man said settling into a chair. "Jolly good. Sounds like a smashing firm." He stroked the chinchilla, which started to purr. "You know, my girlfriend Trixie would go wild for this thing, it would make a fabulous coat."

Trevor grabbed the animal and stuck it under his shirt, all the while glaring at the gentleman in front of him.

"I know who you are now," he said, cradling the chinchilla. "You're not a writer at all, you're a detective."

"I am?" Sexton said in mock surprise. "Smashing!"

Trevor went on. "I've been reading your books. The ones you starred in. They're all but forgotten in my time, I take it that this is not my time. I'm halfway through a recording of 'The Case of the Correspondent from Cairo' right now. I'd be done by now, if I wasn't wrapped up in my own mystery."

"How extraordinary!" said Sexton. "I suppose I must be a detective, then. And look here..." He fumbled at his breast pocket and pulled out a piece of papyrus, the same piece that had

caused so much trouble of late. "I've just received a rather extraordinary communiqué from Egypt."

"You know, that thing is a mess of secret symbols and codes and messages," Trevor said. "If you make it past one, than you'll just find another one. It's a literary set of Russian dolls."

Sexton's eyes widened as he ran his finger along the paper. "You're right!"

Trevor arched an eyebrow. "Are you implying that there's a message written on it in Braille, too?"

The other man laughed, loud and long. The chinchilla squirmed.

"Of course not!" Sexton said. "That would be too obvious." He collected himself and wiped a mirthful tear from his left eye before fumbling at his other breast pocket. "No, I just so happen to have this handy device..."

He pulled a large instrument from his pocket. It looked something like a brass microscope, but with a small stylus attached to the scanning bed and a large speaker protruding from the eyepiece.

"What is it?" Trevor asked.

Sexton placed the end of the papyrus under the stylus and unfolded a large crank that had been almost hidden on the left side of the contraption.

"It's an electronophone," he said. "It will play the music of the spheres, the tiny spheres that make up all matter. Once we hear what it says, we'll know the final secret, the one that runs beneath them all."

Sexton grabbed the handle, and turned it. An ungodly noise issued from the device as it played the papyrus like it was a record, a cacophony of sound equal in irritation only to an old 56K modem. Trevor shrieked and felt his belly go wet and sticky. He suspected that the chinchilla had urinated.

Sexton slowed the crank, then stopped it all together. He looked at Trevor expectantly.

"What do you say, old man? Are you enlightened yet?"

"No!" Trevor all but yelled. "I don't have any idea what is going on! None at all. Not about this, not about anything. I think I know someone, and they turn out to be someone else. Or I don't know someone, not even a little bit, only they turn out to be the most important person in the world to me, and only when it's too late to do anything about it!"

Sexton took a sip of Trevor's coffee. "But that sort of thing happens all the time."

Trevor sighed and attempted to calm down, his agitation was negatively affecting the chinchilla. "Only in stories. In your case: particularly histrionic stories. But I live in reality, and there shouldn't be spies in my life. Hell, I was even believing in Martians for a while. Martians! And I know for a fact that there are no such things."

Sexton sat bolt upright. "By Jove! Are you sure? Why, the newspapers have been full of articles about the little green monsters of late. Horrible beasts, I was just thinking of writing my next novel about them. Perhaps some sort of invasion. But if they don't exist... well

then, perhaps I'll write something else. I've had a stupendous idea for a novel about a world populated by short people. I was thinking they could go on some sort of quest. Involving jewelry. That last part is Trixie's idea."

Trevor leaned forward, elbows on the table. He stared into the street, where a harlequin was arguing with a woman. The clown noticed him, pointed, and shouted something in a strange language; Trevor couldn't even venture a guess as to which one. The woman turned toward him, and he could see that she was wearing dark glasses and had a tattoo of a star on her nose.

"The mole," Trevor said aloud, staring at her. She stuck her tongue out at him and turned away.

"My dear boy," Sexton said. "You're not getting anywhere. If you don't start piecing the mystery together soon..."

"I know. It seems like every time something falls into place, something else unravels. And often a thing will happen, and then be undone the very next day. It's maddening."

Sexton put his hand on Trevor's shoulder. "How long has this been going on?"

"Three weeks. Three awful, awful weeks. By rights I should be home right now, preparing a Thanksgiving turkey."

Sexton cocked his head. "That's that American holiday, what?"

Trevor nodded. "Yes, I was going to have friends over. Instead I'm flying all over the world, and I don't think I'll be back in time. And actually, at this rate, I won't have any friends or family left alive."

"Something of a misnamed holiday then," Sexton said.

The conversation lapsed into silence. Sexton pulled out his quill and notebook again. He stared at them for a moment then addressed Trevor once again.

"I say, I don't believe you ever told me your name."

"Aimes, Trevor Aimes."

Sexton cocked his head. "Why that's a funny coincidence! I'm writing a story about a Mr. Aimes right now. He's something of a detective, good with languages and all that. I don't have much of a name for the book yet, I'm just sort of calling it 'The Mystery.'"

"Let me see that!" Trevor lunged for the notebook, but Sexton snatched it away and shook his finger.

"No, no, no," he said. "You mustn't read it until it's finished. It's bad luck to peek at the ending when you're smack-dab in the middle."

Trevor leaned back and tried to conceal his frustration. "Can you at least tell me what happens next?"

Sexton rifled through the pages. "You're in the dungeon right now?"

"Yes."

"I see." The man appeared deep in thought.

Trevor waved to get his attention. "Can you help me?"

Sexton shook his head.

"Why not?" Trevor asked. His chinchilla was squirming again; he could feel it scaling the inside of his shirt, crawling up to his chest.

Sexton frowned. "Well you see, I only have the one chapter written. And I don't think it'll be a help to you."

"You've only written the first chapter?" Trevor asked. The chinchilla popped its head out of his collar and squeaked.

"No, not that one. I've only written the twenty-second. And that's not going to help you." Sexton pressed his lips together in a frown.

"Why not?"

"Because it's a hallucination brought on by the opiates fed you by your captors. It's utter nonsense. They're hoping that your deranged ramblings will reveal the truths buried in your subconscious."

Trevor looked at the chinchilla, which twitched its whiskers. "And will they?"

Sexton shrugged. "I don't know. I only wrote this one chapter."

Trevor sighed.

"But I can tell you one thing," Sexton added. "About the chinchilla."

"Yes?"

"She's female."

Trevor lifted the animal out of his shirt and looked between its legs. Sure enough, Sexton told the truth.

"You name her Emily now, then the scene fades out, and you wake up."

"Emily, huh?"

Things dissolved like a watercolor in the rain.

## **Chapter 23 (written by Alan Davis Drake)**

"For more than three weeks, your brother has been living in a phantasmagoric world—half real and half induced. Dreams informed his mind, and his fading mind informed his dreams. This is the same induced world that eventually came to kill my husband and our son before him."

"You're speaking of T. M.," Tracey said with great sympathy. "Yes, I'm beginning to see." With half-closed eyes, she leaned back into the plush, high-backed chair. Wrapped in a soft, warm blanket, her legs tucked up casually, Tracey held a large mug of tea cupped in her firm, sure hands. Breathing in the smoky aroma, she released a quiet murmur of pleasure and took a sip. Her eyes closed. The dwindling logs made quiet pops in the open hearth before them.

"Lapsong Souchong," Elder said. "Hand picked and flavored near Mount Wuyi in Fujian province. This is not imposter tea."

"I know," Tracey responded. "My favorite—with soy milk, too! Thank you." Tracey's eyes were open and inviting.

"I know, you know." Elder returned the smile.

A spool of green, silk ribbon rolled in short bounces across the floor, unraveled itself at Tracey's chair and trailed under it, quickly followed by three kittens of varying colors. The red tabby leading the charge leaped forward, hitting its head on Tracey's chair leg.

The two women laughed deeply as, one piling into the other, the kittens rolled and clawed helplessly in the knotting mass of green silk. Both women bent over to free them. The swift tabby ran off to hunt on the other side of the room.

With a fluffy calico in her lap and a hint of laughter still in her voice, Elder began, "I once heard that Chuang Tzu dreamt he was—"

"A butterfly!" Tracey explained to the smoky gray kitten in her lap as it swatted earnestly at her mug.

"Yes, a butterfly." Elder continued. "A happy butterfly, doing as he wished, being his true butterfly self. His dream was so real he didn't know that he was Chuang Tzu. And then, in a supreme rush, he awoke. But when he awoke..."

"He did not know if he was Chuang Tzu," continued Tracey, as if in the same breath, "who had just dreamed he was a butterfly..."

"Or if he were now a butterfly, dreaming he was Chuang Tzu," finished Elder. And with the same easy communion, they returned to their cups, in spite of the curiosity of kittens.

A hint of dawn was waking over the forest beyond the formal room.

"The falcons will be stirring soon," the older woman said. Slipping the kitten onto the seat, she rose from her chair and walked to the window. "Would you like to meet them?"

"Yes, very much. But I must say, I am very tired," Tracey replied, surprised by her own straightforwardness.

"Then you can imagine how tired I must be!" And they laughed.

"Nearly as tired as Trevor." Tracey was anxious to bring the conversation back to her brother.

"Let him sleep a little longer. We will speak, the three of us. After that, you and Trevor are on your own."

"And you, Elder?"

"Elder is no more. Remember? There is only great-grandmother."

"Great-grandmother," Tracey repeated with some little awe.

"Grandmother Theresia, would please me greatly."

The gray kitten skittered off as Tracey rose and crossed to her great-grandmother at the window. "Grandmother Theresia," Tracey echoed in an unexpectedly young voice, gazing out the window, shoulder to shoulder with Theresia.

The old woman smiled, drawing Tracey closer. "My dear, my dear. Together, you and Trevor will become what I once was." Her arm encircled Tracey, and she turned her towards the growing daylight. "But so much more. More than all who came before us. For you have unraveled the mystery of that which killed husband and son, and killed so many before

them. And you have saved more than your brother by its discovery."

"Yes. I do see. I understand now," Tracey said without thinking.

"They fed him his own curiosities, his own obsessions. They knotted his web of self-interest, as they did to my husband and son. They fixed them on themselves so that they could see nothing more. They took our men's goodness from them, and made our line useless to anyone. They manipulated our line by encouraging things that don't matter."

"In the meanwhile," Tracey said, "in their narrowness, they mistook everything unimportant to be priceless. How?"

"They created imaginary doppelgangers."

"All that happened to Trevor happened only in his imagination?" Tracey asked.

"Yes. You were never comfortable contributing him with his obsessions, were you? But out of love you help him none the less. You didn't know how to communicate it, but you knew it was all wrong; you knew it needed to be changed. It needed a change of vision. We are no longer characters in anyone's novel, play, or fantasy. And then you saw they were all delusion —puffs of dust, insubstantial and unreal. And now we know their source."

"Global," Tracy said. Her hands moved to her face and she massaged it gently.

"Yes. But it's important not to lump everyone together. It's important not to demonize them. That would not be our way. There are a handful that have been taught... Well, here is where it becomes difficult. How to reveal what doesn't serve mankind, without being self-serving or equally destructive. Remember our motto."

"Yes, I must find a way to other way."

"You will. You and Trevor."

At the sound of a door opening, the two women turned in a single motion to look over their shoulders.

"Be cheerful, sir!" said a deep male voice rumbling from across the room.

"Trevor!"

Tracey ran to her brother. She hugged him, then spun him around and looked him up and down.

"Let him finish, Tracey," Elder said. "Begin again, my handsome butterfly. Tell us."

Trevor drew a shaky breath, almost tearful, and bowed to Theresia. Then resolutely he began again, "Be cheerful, sir!" and he stepped into Prospero's true being and smiled at his sister. Affecting a serious playfulness, his voice full of energy, he continued:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors  
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and  
Are melted into air, into thin air;  
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,  
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,  
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,  
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,  
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,  
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on; and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep.

The two women applauded enthusiastically, and Trevor responded with a gracious bow of his head. And he smiled.

Tracey grabbed her brother's hand again and pulled him energetically towards the window. "Very good, very good, my brilliant Shakespeare, our grown-up butterfly. You've passed the test."

"Yes, very good," said Elder, hugging Trevor, who laughed and kissed her on the cheek.

"Let's go outside to meet the falcons," said Tracey. Though her enthusiasm appeared child-like, she had already assumed her place in the world, in her own way, just as Trevor had transcended Prospero, and now exuded a profound understanding of human suffering and joy.

"Now *is* the time," Elder agreed, turning a hidden handle in the large, paned window to swing the door section outward. Walking at a quick pace that belied her age, she swiftly passed through the dew-covered gardens. "We have a lot to discuss before you leave." Then she stopped abruptly in her place and turned to the siblings: "But no more guns. No more weapons. No more intrigue." She held them in the silence of her sad gaze. The twins communicated an identical understanding with a measured turn of their heads. Elder moved in a similar way, and then said, "You will meet the falcons, and you will give them your guile as a gift."

"How do I—" the twins said in unison.

"Look and listen. And then, you're off to clean up this mess."

## **Chapter 24 (written by Michael Sirois)**

The falcon's talons bit deeply into Trevor's leather gauntlet. Gently, Trevor pushed upward and released the jesses, allowing the peregrine to leap skyward and join Tracey's already circling bird. Above the treetops now, the falcon had a full view of the countryside, could easily see the town of Catskill, just to the north. The bird circled slowly above the small

circular island, searching for food.

The island was nestled in a bend in the Hudson River. From high in the air it looked like a giant wreath, the sturdy ring of trees that encircled the outer edges of the island provided an effective curtain between those in the compound and prying eyes on the shore or the river. The compound itself could only be seen from the air, and even then – with most of it buried underground – it would only look like several small hills, curled up beside the trees. Potential traces of inhabitation had been cleverly engineered to disappear through a series of vents, so the smoke from the fireplace, as well as the steam from the boilers, along with most of the other effluvia created through human occupation, was released into the river or into the air far away from the island.

Down below, Trevor craned his neck skyward, trying to follow the flight of the bird. He still felt weak from the weeks of delirium, and the cold bit into his flesh as surely as the falcon would soon bite into its breakfast. He could see the slow arc of the bird's flight interrupted suddenly by a quick course correction, followed by a sharp dive straight toward a patch of snow along the treeline. Just before an imminent crash, the peregrine straightened into a horizontal glide, talons outstretched, and then rose again with a small, struggling mass of white fur firmly within its grasp.

Several minutes later, with the falcons both fed and safely ensconced in their mews, Tracey and Trevor rejoined their great-grandmother inside the house.

"Great-Grandmother, I need to know some things. I've had some pretty miserable dreams the past few weeks, and . . ." he said, quoting from *The Tempest* again, "misery acquaints a man with strange bedfellows."

His great-grandmother gently interrupted, "Trevor, it's time to let Shakespeare go."

Tracey interrupted, "And call her Grandmother Theresia."

"But what does Prospero do next?" Trevor asked, of no one in particular. Tracey's voice came to him, unbidden.

"Trevor, Prospero is no more. Our world and our purpose aren't ruled by literature, only informed by it. You're not Prospero any more than I'm Miranda."

"Then what am I, who am I?"

"Come sit on the couch," Theresia said, "and we'll all have some more tea and talk this over. It will all be clear before long. In fact, I have just the tea for you. Do you remember the time, when you were a teenager and I said I had just been shopping and I had brought home some Prince of Wales tea, and you said . . ."

"Great-grandma, can I see them?"

"That's right. You thought I had said I purchased some prints of whales' teeth, and you wondered why anyone would take a picture of a whale's tooth, but – being the curious boy you have always been – you did want to see what a whale's tooth looked like."

The three of them smiled in silence for a moment, then Theresia pressed a button on the bracelet on her wrist. A voice emanated from it, "Yes, Elder."

"Pierre, I've told you. No more Elder. That time is past."

"Yes, madame."

"Could you please prepare some Prince of Wales tea for us?"

"Of course, madame. Trevor is up then?"

"Yes, Pierre," and answering the unspoken question, "and he's doing fine."

Theresia pointed to her bracelet and smiled. "It is easier to keep my intercom on my wrist these days than it is to walk over to the desk."

A few minutes later, Pierre Fougères entered bearing a tray with tea and some small cakes. "Good to see you, Master Trevor."

"And you too, Pierre. Thank you," Trevor replied, remembering the family's manservant from his childhood.

Once Pierre had left the room, Trevor breathed deeply, inhaling the slightly fruity aroma of the tea. Fragments of memories from his childhood flitted into view. Pierre was in them and so was his sister Tracey, and his parents and grandparents. The events were scrambled in an odd, incoherent fashion. His mother tries on his father's suit. His father insists that it will work fine. Trevor and Tracey are watching from the bedroom closet. Their great-grandfather doesn't appear for breakfast one day, and there is consternation on everyone's faces. A few days later, their great-grandmother is gone and their great-grandfather reappears, as if nothing was different. While Tracey and Trevor are still young, there are many deaths and disappearances in their family – parents, aunts, cousins – and everyone notices, and no one seems to notice. Trevor murmurs aloud, "What's real?"

Theresia's voice brings him back to the present. "I would imagine you have questions."

"Oh, yes – so many questions," he thought, but just nodded his head in assent.

"Let me tell you a story, then. A story about your family." Her eyes glimmered with the recall of so many events as she searched for the place to begin. "Once, many, many years ago . . ." and she wove a magical tale of good knights and bad knights, and organizations that split apart because of deep and bitter resentments within their structures, of families born into the organization and torn apart time and time again. This part of the story was a long time in the past, and it was very familiar to Trevor for some reason. He found more than anything that he was anxious for her to finish, and get to the end so he could close the book and be done with the story, but he knew it wouldn't be that simple. The book would still be open and blank and waiting for him – and Tracey – to finish writing the chapters they

were in, so he needed to be patient and pay attention because the past would surely affect the future.

When she was finally done with the basic history, she paused and said to Trevor. "Tracey and I have discussed much of this already, but I sense from your unease that you would like for me to get to the personal history of your family."

"Yes, Grandmother Theresia. I need to know what happened to me these past few weeks. I know it can't all have been real, I must have dreamed or imagined some of it, but I'm just not sure which memories to trust anymore."

"Then let me get to the most important part. Eventually, the Knights of Malta became more of a political organization that operated without a true territory. The current Grand Master, the leader of the organization, is British, but there are many thousands of members all over Europe. Most of them operate within the charitable arm of the organization, and their purpose is literally to do good deeds for mankind, performing charitable and humanitarian activities. As far back as the early 1800's, though when the Treaty of Paris . . ."

"Yes, I know, the Knights had Malta taken away from them, but what does this have to do with my family?"

"Patience, Trevor." She smiled, and said to Tracey, "He always was the anxious one, wanting to move on to the next thing before the first thing was done."

Trevor sighed. She was right. He had always wanted to know the outcome before he came to it. He leaned back in the couch and tried to relax. "I'm sorry, Grandmother Theresia, please go on."

"Thank you," she smiled. "Now, where was I? Ah, yes. The Knights had fought many long and bitter battles for Malta. To have it yanked away again angered many of them. An offshoot organization of the Knights, known simply as The Order – founded by some of your ancestors – went underground and took on the mission of recovering Malta for the Knights.

"As this secret organization evolved, a schism formed within it. Some members realized that continued bloodshed for a piece of land was not a path to enlightenment; others didn't see it that way and insisted on continuing the quest to regain control of Malta. They split from The Order and took the name Globus Magnificus, which was shortened to GLOBAL sometime after the First World War. As they gained power, the goal of recouping Malta seemed insignificant to them. They desired much, much more, probably the whole world.

We know that they were working with Hitler during World War II, organizing some of his plans to eradicate the Jews and Gypsies and the others. Who would have been next?

"The Order also gave up their dreams of regaining Malta when they realized how much pain and suffering this useless quest had caused. They adopted a new mission once they realized what GLOBAL was doing, and decided The Order could be best used in the role of the opponent in this global – if you'll pardon the play on words – chess game. Over the years The Order won many minor skirmishes and lost many, but still managed to keep GLOBAL in check. Neither side ever created an outright checkmate, though, even after nearly two centuries."

Sensing that Trevor was growing restless with this history, she held up a hand to him. "I know, I know. But this is important. All right, I'll hurry." She paused to think what else she must tell him. "The most important thing I have to tell you is that the curse of your ancestors has been lifted, thanks to your sister, Tracey."

"What curse? What?" Trevor said.

"Perhaps Tracey should tell you that part," Theresia suggested, relinquishing the story. She seemed grateful to be able to relax for a moment. The effort was obviously tiring for her.

"What curse, Sis?"

"Well, don't get pissed off, Trevor, but I'm going to have to tell you a little bit of the history, too."

"Fine," he said, resigned to his fate.

"Okay. Way back then, when Globus Magnificus split from The Order, they approached everything differently. The Globus guys tried to spread out as much as possible, new recruits, more soldiers, bigger infrastructure. The Order went in the other direction, tried not to recruit new people unless necessary, tried to keep things tight and contained, a smaller infrastructure. There was a lot of intermarriage, especially among the people at the head of the organization – our family. Several generations down the line, signs of genetic abnormalities began to crop up in our bloodline; there were a disproportionate number of stillborns, some mental retardation and some deformities. There were also quite a few geniuses, and it seems that we were fortunate enough to have received some of those genes, but we also received a trait that plagued many of the leaders through the years, and the trait didn't recede even once the practice of intermarriage was stopped."

"What trait. What is it?" Trevor asked.

"It seems that those who carry the gene have at least a 90% probability of an auto-immune disorder kicking in when they become middle age or younger. There's no way to tell when, or if, it will happen. Essentially, your body will begin eating itself up from the inside. For some reason, it begins to affect the brain first, not destroying tissue there, but affecting the synapses, causing them to fire randomly at odd times. This results – as you can imagine – in something akin to hallucinations, although they are generally rooted in real memories. The brain seems to return to normalcy, with possibly even a heightened sensibility, but this is usually followed soon after by degeneration of muscles and tissue as the body wastes into . . . well, a pretty gruesome state. Some people wasted away and died within weeks, and others have lasted years."

Trevor looked across the couch at Theresia, "Are you . . ." he couldn't finish.

"Me? Heavens no. This body is just very, very old. Charles, yes. He did die of this dreadful thing, and I took his place, pretending to be him." She smiled with a satisfaction born from years of hiding the secret. "I met Charles when he was with the Resistance in France, during World War II. He was trapped in our barn with Nazis closing in on him. I had seen him enter the barn, and convinced the Germans that he had taken our *camion* – odd how the old words return – our truck, and had driven it away to the west. He stayed there with us for a week, until it was safe for him to return to Marseille, but he returned often, and when the war was over, he married me. Your mother was my granddaughter. She met your father on a trip to London and brought him into our little family. Unfortunately, despite the introduction of new blood over the past ninety years or so, both you and Tracey have the gene that's causing all this. But you had better finish the story, Tracey."

"All right. The problems you were experiencing the past few weeks were caused by the

disorder attacking your brain. I was sure of it when I listened to some of your messages and ramblings on the phone. I tried every way I could think of to reach you, but it wasn't possible until now. Great-Grandpa Charles contacted me years ago, when he found out I had become a geneticist, and was working at Cornell. He brought some information to me about a 'friend' of his whose family had this terrible condition for many generations, and wanted to know if it was a project I would be interested in. I knew there was something fishy when he offered to bring tissue sample to me instead of introducing the friend to me. I guessed pretty quickly that he was talking about himself, and got him to confide in me. I couldn't have been working in a more perfect place, the Cornell Human Ecology Lab. I've often thought that he had something to do with my getting a job there in the first place." She gave her great-grandmother a questioning look, but Theresia just shrugged her shoulders and smiled.

"Anyway," Tracey said gleefully, "I did it. I solved the puzzle, and you were my first patient. You've been undergoing gene therapy the whole time you've been here, and it's working. The fevers and the hallucinations are receding, and the secondary symptoms that I saw Great-grandpa Charles go through haven't shown up in you yet. I think you're going to be okay."

"Well, Sis, that's good. And don't think I'm not grateful, but I still have tons of unanswered questions."

"Okay, such as?"

"To begin with, how much of what I've been through was real?"

"What do you think you've been through?"

"Oh, right. If it was all in my head, you wouldn't know anything about it."

He gave them a quick rundown of everything he remembered from the past few weeks, the trip to the travel agency, then Cairo, meeting Hazel Brown, going to Malta and meeting Fulvia, the distasteful episodes Fulvia put him through, using the Sloth and trying to use the Chinchilla, however unsuccessfully, the incidents in Prague, tracking down Professor Prazak in New York, realizing that Hazel was the travel agent was Rebecca, watching her die, being flown to a castle somewhere in France where he was stabbed, and finally ending up here. "Where is here, anyway?" he asked.

"You're in The Order's compound, near Catskill, New York."

A memory flashed in front of him. "Angela's Pancake House? Is that in Catskill?"

"Yes, it is. We used to take you there when you were a child."

"It doesn't make sense, though. I remember Italian food. A pasta of some kind."

"That isn't an hallucination. Angela's served pancakes in the morning and Italian at night. You were probably remembering the penne pasta that they served in hot garlic oil."

"Yes. That's it. Can we go there?" he said, suddenly realizing how hungry he was.

"No, it's best that we stay out of sight for a while. Pierre can whip something up that's just as good, I'm sure. You and Tracey have too much to do."

"What's that?"

"Let her finish telling you some things, and I'll get Pierre to cook you something. I need to move around a little anyway. It's not good for my old bones to sit too long." She struggled to her feet, Trevor helping her stand, and made her way to the door.

"So, Sis. Did I just step out of the Dallas shower, or was it all real?"

"A little of both," Tracey said. "We were tracking your whereabouts, trying to find you as soon as possible, and here's pretty much everything we know. You did wander into a travel agency in London, and you *were* talked into a trip to Cairo by a cute bubbled-headed twenty-two year old named Evie. There was a tour guide named Hazel Brown in Cairo. She's been working for LibriTours since she retired from teaching three years ago at the age of fifty-four. She said you were supposed to meet the tour group for dinner your first night, but you never showed. You left a note at the front desk of the hotel and said you needed to go to Malta. You logged in and spent some time on LibriVox's and Google's web sites. Now, here's the tricky part.

"You *did* meet a woman named Fulvia Rossi in Malta, and she *is* an agent for GLOBAL. You were with her for several days. We don't know exactly what she did to you, but from what we know about her, it must've been pretty bad. You *did* develop a technique called the chinchilla that allowed you to rapidly sift tremendous amounts of data and intuit a conclusion about the data. You did that work at Cambridge, and much of it has been used in some of the current AI software at MIT and Cal Tech.

"You never developed a form of hypnotism called the Sloth. You accompanied Fulvia to Prague and then New York. She was apparently following some leads you gave her about Professor Prazak, who was my linguistics professor when I spent two of my post-grad years at Berkeley, not at Charles University. He still teaches linguistics at Berkeley. He wasn't on a lecture tour to New York or anywhere else. You apparently – without knowing what you were doing – led Fulvia on a wild-goose chase from Malta to Prague to New York, where we caught her and brought both of you back here. Just in time, in my opinion. If you hadn't received the gene therapy when you did, I'm afraid it might have been too late."

"Well, thanks, Sis, but don't let it go to your head."

She laughed and threw a pillow at him. "Oh, you idiot."

He became somber for a moment. "So, no Rebecca?"

"No, Trevor. Sorry."

They sat in silence for a while longer, until the noise of Theresia and Pierre intruded as they returned, preceded by the glorious smell of roasted garlic, causing everyone's mouths to water. While they ate, Theresia said, "There are some final things I need to say. I have already spoken to Tracey about this and she agrees with me. It is up to you to complete the agreement. I am stepping down from my position – Charles' position – as the leader of The Order. He became known as Elder several years ago, and that became his title, but the official title is Grand Master, patterned after the head title of the Knights of Malta from whence we came. I want the two of you to take over and become joint Grand Masters. You don't have to call yourselves that if you don't like it. I suggest something simple, like 'T', which could stand in opposition to 'Top', the head of GLOBAL. Or it could just stand for Tracey or Trevor, whichever of you is in charge at the moment. What do you say?"

Trevor looked at Tracey and saw the encouragement in her eyes. They nodded to each other and the deal was sealed.

Trevor laughed. "So, it's the two of us together, Sis. How does that work?" Trying unsuccessfully to sound like John Lennon, Trevor parodied a familiar Beatles song, "So it's

I am 't' as you are 't' as you are me  
and we are 'T' together?"

"Yes," Tracey answered softly, smiling. "Something like that. Two small 't's' combining to make one large one."

Looking at Theresia, he said, "What do we do first?"

"I suppose I could have a few last words for you before I step out of the picture. Do you see the family crest on the wall there?"

"Yes."

"The motto is '*Ne Pas Faire de Mal*', which means . . ." and Tracey finished it for her.

"Do No Harm. That's a pretty good motto".

"As far as your first order of business, though, you need to destroy that computer database that GLOBAL nearly has ready. If they get it up and running and close the program's backdoors, they could run countries, control stock markets, anything they want to do."

Trevor looked up, shocked. "You mean, that part is real?"

Both Tracey and Great-Grandmother Theresia said, "Yes."

## **Chapter 25 (written by David Barnes)**

For a few moments, Trevor again retreated into himself, into the painful fog of uncertainty. Where were the sharp edges of reality, and where the phantasms of his diseased imagination? Theresia and Tracey had just confirmed the existence of GLOBAL's database, but what of the hours he remembered spending inside it? His foray had triggered in him a delicious mixture of elation, envy and fear. It was as if, during the twenty years of his self-enforced inactivity, an alter ego had been working behind his back to create for him the ultimate analytical tool; but to what end? His intellect had thrilled at the power the database presented, while his human instinct was horrified by the uses it could be put to if it fell into the wrong hands. If? It had been *built* by the wrong hands. There was no if, no doubt about the purposes for which it was intended. Still, he couldn't help wondering...

"Let's just step back from that for a moment," he said, returning to the physical world. "The destruction of the database, I mean," he adds, seeing Theresia's arched eyebrows.

Here we go, thought Tracey. "*Trevor Sees Both Sides*; that'll be the title of your autobiography," she said, with just enough playfulness not to hurt.

"Yes Sis, thank you for that. Now tell me: where do you see the major fields of conflict, now and in the next century or so?"

"Military conflict?" said Theresia. "Trevor, have you not been listening these past hours? What interest do you have in war, other than working to prevent it?"

"That is precisely my point. I wonder if the database couldn't point towards the possibility of a different type of geopolitical landscape. One where the traditional nation-states, and all the paraphernalia that goes with them, including military conflict, would be an irrelevance. I know it's a long shot, but hear me out and you'll see what I mean." Theresia and Tracey exchanged a look, but both settled back in their chairs.

"At its basic level, the database is a collection of individual pieces of information: documents, records of transactions, photos, sound files; each tagged to the individuals involved, and each searchable. Looked at vertically, they form a personal history, an audit trail. We're uncomfortable with that, and rightly so, on a personal level."

"Understatement of the year," interrupted Tracey. "It scares the living daylights out of me. Of course we know that most of this information is out there anyway, but the thought of it being held in one place, by a group accountable to no one, and for their own devious purposes.... Well, it's indefensible!" She paused, caught a glance from Theresia, and said: "Sorry. Go on. But this had better be good."

"Right. Now, de-personalize those pieces of information. It doesn't matter who wrote a particular sentence, or who owns a particular copy of 'I Am the Walrus', for example; but the content of the sentence itself does matter, and it does matter that the copy of the song exists. You could say that both are part - a very small part, admittedly, but part nonetheless - of the sum total of human activity at this point in time."

"Well, that's a little less scary," Tracey conceded; "But for someone so impatient with other people's stories, you sure know how to string one out!"

"Are you familiar with the concept of memes?"

"Yes, I've heard the word before. Like genes, but not physical?"

"Not bad, Trace. A meme is a unit of culture. Transmissible, self-replicating, mutating. Competing for airtime. Competing for our attention. Each striving to make as many copies of itself as possible, and to mutate into even more successful forms. We're dependent on them. Communication as we know it would be impossible without them. In this sense, the first meme was 'Ug', but they're now far more subtle. The smell of Lapsang Souchong is a meme, created centuries ago, and successful in the sense that it is an attractive smell, which can be replicated through a consistent process of cultivation and processing. The people who invest time to recreate and propagate the meme, by producing and selling the tea, are rewarded for doing so by the livelihood it gives them. In terms of market share, it's less successful than Coke or Pepsi, but only time will tell which will win in the long run.

"And you and I, Trace, are busily spreading a much newer meme. How many times have you said or heard the phrase, 'This is a LibriVox recording'? Not only do we repeat the phrase, and tell others to repeat it, but we've created a vehicle for its preservation in time, and its instantaneous global transmission. And our reward? Well, it's part of a larger

process, isn't it? We're bringing texts created a century or so ago - some far older - into the digital age; we're bringing them into the modern cultural battlefield, so to speak; and that phrase is like an entry ticket; it gets that file onto a server where it will be hosted in perpetuity, it allows it to be copied and disseminated; it creates a pairing of memes, travelling together, each aiding the success of the other."

Tracey stood up in exasperation, and stepped back from the tea table, nearly knocking over her chair. "Please tell me you're not trying to use LibriVox as a justification for GLOBAL's creepy, Big Brother database! What's wrong with the good old Internet, for heaven's sake?"

"Tracey, please," said Theresia. "Let's enjoy the fruits of your brother's recovery, and not judge him too harshly just yet. But Trevor my dear, where is this leading?"

Trevor had been visibly checked by Tracey's outburst, and realised he needed to phrase the next part of his argument very carefully. "It might help now to think of memes as tiny physical entities, rather like bacteria or some such. Imagine that their numbers, their concentrations, their physical location, their speed and direction of movement, their patterns of dispersal, their successive mutations, the relationship of one variety to another could be seen, measured, monitored. You could gauge the competitive success of one meme, or group of memes, against another. You could design new memes with proven successful traits. You could view the ebbs and flows of the global marketplace. You would know who was winning, where and how."

"You mean, we could see if Lapsang Souchong was outselling Coca Cola. Great."

"Tracey, it's bigger than that."

"That's precisely what I was afraid of."

In the containment quarters, in a semi-basement on the other side of the compound, Fulvia Rossi had awoken and was trying to ascertain where she was and how she had got there. She had administered drugs often enough on captives herself, but had never suffered the headache, nausea and disorientation that came with waking up from such treatment. Still, that she had been taken and incarcerated, that she was in enemy hands, was clear enough. The room was surprisingly spacious, light and clean. Sparsely furnished, and with no loose objects that might serve as a missile or weapon, but still civilised. There was even a wash basin and toilet half-concealed in a corner. "There must be a weakness here somewhere. These people are soft," she thought. Her shoes were nowhere to be seen, and the floor was cool under her bare feet. Stretching herself to full height, she could see out of the small, barred window, a foot below the ceiling, that looked out at ground level across the lawn and to the trees that defined the horizon. There was nothing to indicate how far she was from New York, but from the quality of the light she guessed it was mid-afternoon. Perhaps she should try the door.

"From the Order's perspective", said Theresia, trying to shift the focus of the conversation, "the popular obsession with national interest, national identity, has seemed rather an anachronism in these times of what is called 'globalisation'. One could almost say that the Knights, the Order and GLOBAL (if I may bracket them together simply to illustrate my point) were forerunners of the multinational corporations that now seem to be thriving; or perhaps even a more honest form of government than that of sovereign states.

Government based on principle rather than mere geography."

"Exactly so. And what better way to see whether your principles are taking root, are winning on the global battlefield..."

"Ah, so now it's a battlefield, not a marketplace," interjected Tracey.

"...than by observing the ebb and flow of memes."

"And that is your defence of GLOBAL?" Tracey came in for the kill. "Your own argument shows that they will use the database for global domination. That is precisely why we have to destroy it. I'm sorry, Trevor, much as I love you and respect your intellect, you have to see that your obsession with information is leading you to a dangerous conclusion."

"Tracey.... Tace.... " Their eyes locked. "Don't you see that this information dispenses with the need for war?"

"No, I don't see that. Not in the least. It creates a new potential for world domination. It creates a new superpower, one against which countries and people will be powerless. It changes everything. It has to be stopped. And you, my exasperating brother, are the only person who can stop it."

## **Chapter 26 (written by Catharine Eastman)**

Trevor sighed, and ran his fingers through his hair. "All right, all right. You've got me." He gave his twin a mournful look. "But just think.. All that lovely information..." Tracey crossed her arms and looked at him meaningfully.

He threw up his hands in mock-resignation. "Right-o. If we destroy the data, we effectively perform a lobotomy on GLOBAL. And the faster we do that, the faster that whole problem goes away. Man," he muttered, "what I wouldn't give to have life be simple again. But I need more time," he said, as Tracey came over and hugged him. "From what I recall – and I'm not certain how much of that recollection is real – their structure looked like a real bugger to get into. Grandmother," he stood and bowed to her, "May I have access to a networked computer, some time, and some more of your marvelous tea?"

Theresia stood as well, and curtsied in return. "Of course, Trevor dear. You may use my office, and I'll have Pierre prepare another pot of tea for your private use." Her eyes twinkled at the unlikely ceremoniousness of the conversation. "But do hurry. For all our sakes." She seated herself once more. "Tracey and I will remain here. There are other issues that must be discussed. Our unexpected guest, for one." She turned her head, gazing out the window, while her fingers tapped idly on the arm of her chair.

\* \* \* \* \*

Not surprisingly, Fulvia found the door locked. The knob could not be turned, and pushing and pulling at the door were equally ineffective. She gave the door a harder shove, with no effect. The mild exertion caused her head to pound with a pain that surprised her. *Owww*, she thought, as her newly roiling stomach added to her discomfort. Slowly and carefully, she returned to the bed and lay down once more.

Soft, these people might be. Stupid, at least to the extent of taking somebody prisoner and then failing to close them in properly, they weren't.

As she lay back, she tried to remember just what had happened. At the beginning of this mission, U3 had told her that Trevor had a document that was important to the Knights of Malta, the old Hospitallers group that was forever nipping at GLOBAL's heels. Her job was to either deliver the document to him, or to destroy it. She'd been getting more and more frustrated with Trevor as time had passed: when she questioned him (with or without her charming little rod), she got the strangest mix of sense and nonsense out of him. Trevor had confirmed the existence of this document, and had insisted that it was with a Professor Prazak; Fulvia hadn't recognized the name, but that didn't matter. Google had confirmed the existence of this man and his linguistic capabilities. But even that much real information had been hard-won. Trevor had spent a great deal of time trying to introduce Fulvia to his pet chinchilla – a nonexistent pet. And he'd frequently stop dead in his tracks, look up with a frightened stare, and shout, "Hazel! Hazel, where are you?"

Fulvia sighed, annoyed in recollection. He'd led them to Prague first. Getting to Prague had been a bit more complicated than she would have liked; she'd gotten so annoyed with Trevor that she had failed to conceal her pistol properly in her luggage and had had a run-in with airport security as a result. Beating the solitary guard with her metal rod had been the quickest and easiest way to escape and return to the plane. Shortly after arriving in Prague, Trevor had insisted that Prazak was on a speaking tour, and that he would keep this document with him as he traveled because of its importance. She'd taken Trevor back to their shared hotel room at that point, and.. applied a bit of pressure to him, to emphasize how important it was that he be open and honest with her regarding the document. Trevor didn't change his story, though. So they'd then flown to New York, the first stop on this supposed speaking tour. Instead of heading directly to NYU, Trevor had brought them to Central Park, continuing to mutter about his stupid chinchilla and needing to feed it. He'd started minutely examining the grass at the edge of The Lake, getting down on his hands and knees and startling the ducks congregated there. Fortunately, it was a weekday morning, around ten, and there were essentially no human passersby to notice his odd behavior, except for the homeless men sitting in a group beside a nearby tree. From the fragments of their conversation that she could hear, Fulvia figured Trevor's behavior wouldn't disturb them in the least.

She'd taken a moment to call U3, informing him of Trevor's odd behavior and the difficulty she was encountering in retrieving the document. U3 had brushed away her explanations. "Just get the document. That's what matters. I don't care what it takes. You can deal with Trevor in any way you like once you've got it." The permission had pleased her, causing her lips to curl in a vulpine grin as she snapped the cellphone shut and returned it to her purse. And then --

A sudden sharp pain in the side of her neck. She reached up and felt the tiny needle sticking there, even as she slumped quietly forward. At the edge of her vision, she saw one of the homeless men standing up from a crouched position, sticking something vaguely pencil-shaped in a pocket, and running towards Trevor. She must have passed out completely, for she remembered nothing more until awakening here.

\* \* \* \* \*

Trevor spent the next two hours searching through the incomprehensibly vast GLOBAL database. He wasn't looking at the specific pieces of information, or at least he was trying not to. (But it was hard to not notice -- for example -- someone's link to a private bank

account in Switzerland that was being used to buy works of art on the black market.) He was searching for an overarching structure to the thing, something that would give him a clue as to where the weak point was and how to exploit it. Once he found that keyhole, one little weak point, he could write a relatively simple script that would overwrite the whole thing quite efficiently, and the whole house of cards would come tumbling down.

If this had been a database designed by an average programmer, it would have been a series of nested arrays: the top level of the array would contain elements that each represented a particular person. Each element of that array would point to a new array, with pointers to different types of data about that person – one for vital stats, one for photographs, one for things that the person had created, etc. Each one of the pointers would then point to an array containing the actual information in that particular category; depending on how detailed the designer wished to get in their categorizations, the arrays could nest downwards practically forever: you could have “Joe Somebody; Created Works; Media – Pencil; Representational; Object represented - Animal; Animal represented - Dog” as six vertical layers to describe a pencil drawing that a person had done of a dog. There would probably be a branch off from the Created Works level to describe the age the person had been and the location where the drawing had been made.

That was if the database had been designed by an average programmer. This clearly hadn't. Here, pieces of data about certain individuals had been linked directly to pieces of data from other individuals that were, as far as he could tell, almost entirely unrelated. Instead of predictable branchings, links ran complicated circles around each other in labyrinthine, rabbit-warren confusion.

Rabbits.

The chinchilla nuzzled gently at his ear as the kittens played under the desk.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tracey ran her hand through her hair, in unconscious imitation of her twin. “Do we have to deal with her?” she asked, a bit plaintively. “Can’t we just... I don’t know, dump her in the river without a lifejacket?” While she had never even seen the woman, she disliked Fulvia thoroughly from everything she’d heard of her activities regarding her brother. “Truth be told, I’m kind of sorry that Gerhardt brought her in when he rescued Trevor. But I suppose we couldn’t just leave her there,” she sighed.

Theresia sank back in her chair. “Ne fais pas du mal,” she said softly. “We couldn’t just dump her in the river. I understand the temptation, of course. Fulvia is an example of some of the darkest instincts in humanity, instincts that I wish could be entirely eradicated. But no guns, no violence. *Ne fais pas du mal.*” She leaned her head against her hand. “However, doing no wrong does not mean not doing justice. And I think I know someone who can help us there.” She pressed the button on her bracelet. “Pierre? Could you place a call to Emily and see if she can come by on her lunch break or after work?”

Tracey asked, “Who’s Emily?”

“A friend. A friend who was a member of the Order, and who works for justice.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Another pot of tea and some pretty good pasta had sharpened Trevor and put him back on the chase. Now, where was that wascally wabbit?

He leaned back and considered. There were a couple of jobs to do here, really. One was to try to gain administrative-level access. If he could do that, then he could go at the database from the inside out, which would likely be the fastest and surest way to eradicate it. At the admin level, he might also be able to determine whether and how often GLOBAL made backups of the database -- there was so much information, he couldn't imagine anyone not backing such a thing up. The database wasn't terabytes of information; it was probably into exabyte territory -- a thousand million gigabytes. The sheer amount of space the backups would take up might indicate that relatively few archives were kept, if he was lucky. If he didn't manage to corrupt the inevitable backups as well, mangling the active database wouldn't do much good.

If he were unable to gain administrative access, he could write a program that would continuously rewrite entries in the active database and gradually corrupt the entire thing. That method would probably take days to complete. He could set multiple copies of the program running at once, but even that would be slow. And it wouldn't be able to do anything about backups.

Furthermore, none of his coding efforts would do anything to tapes or other hard media that might be archived off the network. Only physical damage could deal with physical archives -- wherever they were.

He idly scanned more entries, following the crosslinks and hoping that some pattern would emerge:

Adams, Eileen. Lover of music. Invented elastic band. Coconut milk used in mother's recipe; changed to dairy milk in 1973. Entrepreneur in small-town America.

He shook his head. The descriptors weren't even all related to this Eileen Adams person; each of them referred to totally separate individuals. Why had they been indexed this way? Why?

The chinchilla insistently rubbed, then nibbled at the choicest words.

Adams. Lover. Invented. Coconut. Entrepreneur.

A L I C E.

\* \* \* \* \*

Emily arrived in midafternoon. "I'm working the 6AM to 2 PM shift now," she explained. Short, stout, and with a no-nonsense look about her, she wore a uniform similar to that of the New York Police Department, but where the badge was normally worn, she wore a pin that depicted a globe surrounded by olive leaves, with a Libra-type balance partially hidden behind it and a sword piercing the globe. The legend "Interpol" was written at the lower edge of the globe. "So you've got someone you think might be of interest to us?" she addressed Theresia.

The old woman nodded. "I believe that you have a Red Notice out for one Fulvia Rossi?"

Emily crossed her arms, an interested look on her plain face. "We do indeed! She attacked a security guard in Malta International Airport -- that's equivalent to a federal crime here in the States. She then fled the country, which is grounds for extradition. The whole thing was recorded on a hidden security camera. And she left this--" Emily took out a folded, slightly tattered paper, "--in the security room. An overdue bill for some handyman tools.

With name, address, etc." She frowned at the paper. "Including one strange item: 'One solid metal rod, 12 inches.' I don't think she was planning to use that in a plumbing project." She put the paper back in her pocket. "The Maltese authorities are definitely interested in having her returned to their care. You've got her here?"

Theresia smiled and rose from her chair. "I know that you folks don't generally interfere in anything that might be connected to religious or military activities, but I thought you might be willing to take her off our hands. In addition to the harm you know about, we may be able to provide a witness to testify against her in a court of law with regard to Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights."

Emily smiled. "Ooo, article 5! Torture and inhumane, cruel, or degrading treatment. So this Fulvia person would definitely not qualify for employment in my upstanding agency." Tracey nodded agreement, knowing that the Interpol constitution laid out the rule of taking actions within the spirit of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Naturally it made sense that Interpol's employees would have that document memorized.

Theresia nodded. "Shall I take you down to her?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Fulvia felt better after lying down for a while. She took another turn around the room, examining her surroundings more closely. She wiggled experimentally at the iron bars at the small window near the ceiling; again, unsurprisingly, they remained firm. The toilet was both functional and clean, and she refreshed herself at the sink. The water from the tap was even drinkable, and a thick, shatter-resistant plastic cup had been thoughtfully provided.

She walked carefully around the perimeter, and noticed that her designer purse had been casually left on the floor leaning against the legs of the small table. Her purse! Oh, these people *were* soft! She couldn't imagine GLOBAL *ever* making that kind of error. Quickly she riffled through the bag. Her metal rod had been confiscated, as had the lockpicks that were standard issue to all GLOBAL agents, but her captors (whoever they were, the sillies) had left her cell phone in the purse.

She quickly retrieved the phone and turned it on, dialing a well-known number as soon as the phone received a signal. She looked around once more, and decided that she couldn't absolutely eliminate the possibility that her prison was bugged. Fine; she'd speak in code. She waited impatiently as the phone rang. At last, a man's voice answered.

"U3."

"Hi, it's Fulvia!" That was code number one. While GLOBAL agents knew the names of the agents they worked with, agents never identified themselves by name to their supervisor over the phone unless they were in trouble. "Is Mom or Dad home?" That was the second code, indicating that an agent was likely in more trouble than they could handle alone and needed help.

"Fulvia." The man's voice had an oddly flat quality to it. It carried no overtones of concern. None at all. For heaven's sake, wasn't he worried? She thought she'd given him a good time that night, good enough that he'd have some personal interest in her. And she'd seen hard, physical evidence that he'd quite liked her little games.

"Yes? What can I tell you?" Code: *I might be overheard*. Mentally she added, *you twit*.

"Fulvia, you remember that Top had taken an interest in your mission?"

"Yes, of course I remember." She chewed her fingernails.

"Top is not pleased."

Oh dear. This was not good. "Er.. no?"

"No. And neither am I."

She put on her very best abashed vocal tone. "I'm sorry, really I am. I'm still working, though. Won't you work with me?" Code: *Cut the garbage and get me out of here.*

"Top has determined that you are no longer useful to us, Fulvia Rossi. You have failed in your mission. Trevor Aimes has secured the document and kept it out of our reach. Further, there is a suspicious user in the database. The security risk to GLOBAL is tremendous. You failed."

Fulvia was startled enough that she broke her code cover. "In the database? Trevor?" She realized that she was babbling, and took hold of herself.

"You have failed, Fulvia. GLOBAL cannot afford to take care of agents who are incapable of caring for GLOBAL."

"But.. but.." Back to babbling, in an incoherent panic; GLOBAL was abandoning her! "What about us? Don't you know I would do anything for you?" Normally, that would be lying through her teeth, but at the moment it was close to the truth.

"You're on your own, Fulvia Rossi." The voice continued its flat affect to the very end, almost as if it had been spoken by a machine. "Goodbye."

GLOBAL broke the connection. Fulvia stared at the phone in growing horror.

\* \* \* \* \*

Trevor followed the white rabbit. He wrote a quick script that would grab the text of Alice in Wonderland from The Gutenberg Project and feed it to the database interface, and something in there would be the administrative password. He was certain of it.

Meanwhile there were other things with which he could occupy himself. For one thing, there was one particular individual that he wanted to look up. It wouldn't hurt the person; what possible harm could come of viewing detailed information of someone who had died?

He opened a new login to the database.

QUERY?

% Rebecca Sharp

The entry had pages of information, much of which he was familiar with. Still, there were the small treasures that Rebecca had never shown him, or had lost or discarded before meeting him: drawings and poems from her early school years, including one of her goldfish back in second grade, Fishy. He smiled, recalling the story she'd told him about finding

Fishy flapping about on the living room rug after a mighty leap out of his bowl. (Happily, Fishy had survived the encounter with dry land.) There were even some voice recordings: Rebecca ordering a pizza with extra cheese and mushrooms, Rebecca calling her credit card company to ask about a strange charge on her bill, Rebecca calling him to arrange a dinner together...

He paged through the entry, reveling in memory. Ten minutes later, he came across another document he'd never seen. It was a letter, and it caught his attention immediately. "Dear Trevor," it started.

"I feel almost silly writing this! This is one of those 'Beloved, I am dead' letters that comes up in overly dramatic Victorian novels. But I still wanted to write it, to leave you a last message, in case it's ever needed.

"If you're reading this, then through some random act of chance, I have died. I don't know how, obviously; you may not know either. Call me a victim of circumstances, if it makes it easier for you.

"I never meant to leave you. I always meant to love you, from nearly the instant that we met back at Cambridge. I did love you then and I still do. Yes, dearheart, even now, I'm sure I must, for I would not be myself if I did not love you.

"Please don't blame yourself because I'm dead. Perhaps I was coming to see you; perhaps we were walking to class together; perhaps, perhaps. It doesn't matter what we were doing. What matters is that we were, and were together.

"Think of me. Think of us together, and remember the joy that we had together. Remember me when you read the poems and books we read aloud together, when you walk the paths we walked together.

"Even though you think of me, do not rush to meet me. Live, dear Trevor. Live, and take in the joys that are still yours. Tell me about them, if you like; I'm sure I'll be listening.

"You hold my heart, dearest, now and forever.

In aeternum,  
Rebecca."

A single tear coursed down Trevor's cheek. He copied and pasted the text into a new document, and hit Print. As it printed, he recited from memory the last stanza of the poem "To One in Paradise," by Edgar Allan Poe:

And all my days are trances,  
And all my nightly dreams  
Are where thy gray eye glances,  
And where thy footstep gleams—  
In what ethereal dances,  
By what eternal streams.

Someone on Librivox had recently made a recording of a poem in memory of a pet who had died; he rather thought that, once he had his life back, he'd record that poem in her memory, perhaps as part of a special collection. That way, his memory of her would be propagated forever, or close to it anyway.

He looked across at the other window, where the password hunt had successfully completed. DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE was the keyphrase, apparently. He snorted at the relative simplicity of the passphrase. Good. He could do his real work now.

Over the next hour, he wrote three different scripts. The first was designed to slowly eat away at the backups of new entries to the database that were captured nightly - the database was far too big to backup the entire thing on any regular basis. That was called Caterpillar, forever eating at the magic mushroom and polluting the surrounding air with his hookah smoke. Caterpillar would get run regardless - and should be started soon, frankly.

The second script was called EatMe. It acted like a mutagen to the keys in the database tables, and would scramble them. Individual pieces of information would remain intact, but their interrelationships would be completely destroyed.

The third script was called DrinkMe. This script was effectively a cup filled with Lethe-water, overwriting every entry in every table, replicating itself as it went so as to do the job relatively quickly. He opened a new command line in the directory with the database.

COMMAND?

% run Caterpillar

His finger hovered over the Return key.

## **Chapter 27 (written by Anita Roy Dobbs)**

Trevor slowly lifted his hands from the keyboard, "So far, too good," he murmured to the screen. He folded his arms and leaned back. It wouldn't do to ignore his instincts. Too much of his mind was running an undercurrent of remembered times with Rebecca; but mixed with those were memories of the Cambridge chinchilla project, and suddenly he became aware of an immediate danger: he was operating on autopilot. He'd been only half present since finding the letter. Flypaper. He had buzzed away, writing the scripts -- Caterpillar, EatMe, DrinkMe -- busy wings, preparing to fly . . . nowhere.

If GLOBAL had wanted to trap him, they couldn't have chosen a more effective method. The shock of that realization put all Trevor's senses on alert. A surge of energy that would have propelled another man to his feet in a fit of pacing, was harnessed and sent racing along a series of mental inquiries.

Trevor jumped at the cell phone alert. A text message: "KuKuKachu" Instantly he disengaged from the GLOBAL database. Then he pushed back from the desk. Pacing would be needed after all.

His personal server, sitting in the pantry of his London flat, was under attack -- "Kachu" -- and would shut down immediately after sending the text message, and maybe that was quickly enough. The decoy hacker he'd set up there on auto-run had been spotted and eradicated. The GLOBAL database sentries had detected the decoy, despite all the input traffic of the planet, within . . . six hours. Detected and destroyed.

He fished out his iriver and copied his scripts. They might be useful, but probably not. Because the real kicker, the mastadon fly in the ointment, the "KuKu" of the message, was

that GLOBAL had a two-man rule in place. Trevor needed Tracey to be his second.

\*\*\*

Emily smiled as if amused. "Take me down to Ms. Fulvia Rossi?" And she chuckled outright. "Let me call local officers. In case Ms. Rossi is reluctant to be arrested." Theresia pictured a centegenarian, an unarmed Interpol officer, and a cornered GLOBAL agent. "Indeed," she laughed, "I could not expect to persuade her."

The desk phone rang, and Tracey bounded to it. "Yes?" she looked expectantly at her great-grandmother. "Thank you, yes! Please! . . . Dr. Prazak? Hello, this is Tracey McHugh -- Tracey Aimes. Trevor Aimes is my brother. I studied-- yes! Right! Hello. I'm call--" Tracey flashed a smile to Theresia and then fixed her gaze on the desk top, listening. Theresia motioned Emily toward the door, and the two of them stepped out to find a quiet place for Emily's call.

"Yes, that's why I'm--" Tracey barely acknowledged their leaving. "Oh, are there? Professor Prazak, I'm sorry to interrupt, but I beg you to listen. Something has happened that may have placed you in . . . harm's way. This phone we're speaking on is secure, and the man who handed you the phone-- he did? Right -- Gerhardt. And a younger man, Peter, will be nearby. If you will allow them, they will fly you here to me -- I'm in New York -- and Trevor is here, too. He-- yes, he is. You have? No-- wait, Dr. Prazak, please say nothing else till you're here with us. The phones are secure, and they can't be traced, but I don't know whether your office could be-- Yes, exactly. So please gather the document -- and bring anything else that you can from your office because, I'm very sorry, Dr. Prazak but you might want to-- Yes, very safe here. And we can accommodate you, yes, for quite a long . . . thank you, Professor. Yes, I'm afraid you're quite right. Yes. Yes, good-bye then."

A trifle dazed, Tracey hung up the phone and sank into the massive chair. In a moment, Trevor strode into the room.

"Tracey, we have a real problem," Trevor began.

"T-for-timing, we may have a real solution, too," Tracey beamed, patting the phone.

\*\*\*

Fulvia Rossi closed her cell phone. Opened it. 1:21. Everything can change in 1 minute and 21 seconds. At 3:45 you're GLOBAL agent M21, about to arrange your release. At 3:47, what are you? She closed the cell phone; placed it on the small table; glanced at the barred windows and back to the phone. She lunged forward -- "Aghh!" -- and shoved the phone, sending it puck-style across the table, through the air, to the wall.

\*\*\*

When the trace was complete, Top had terminated the conversation with Fulvia. It would do her good to realize how completely dependent she was on the good graces of GLOBAL. She had taken too many liberties, made too many mistakes. But she was too valuable to lose if they could reclaim her, and too risky to leave alive if they could not. Top skimmed into the trace: where was she? Was it saying Paris or Prague?

Top reached a team nearest Berkeley, California. "Professor Andel Prazak, Berkeley Department of Linguistics. When you reach him, I will talk to him. He will be lured. No scene. You will bring him to me carefully. Campanile Way near Sather Road. The cell signal is still there. Be quick. If it moves, I'll contact you."

Top continued a simultaneous connection with U3, initiated 20 minutes ago, when the

London hack was detected. It had been startling to realize that Trevor had made his way back to London without leaving a trace en route. But there he was, tapping into the GDB -- testing his capacity to cripple? U3's team had been deployed immediately. "Pick him up -- carefully -- and bring him to me. He appears to be coherent. Don't trigger anything." They had finally reached the flat.

*Excellent. Within the day, they'll all be here. Trevor, and Fulvia. Prazak, and the document, no doubt, and then no hacking will be so threatening. Then, too, Trevor might accept the offer.*

Fulvia's trace came back saying Paris AND Prague. This call came from two origins? Of course not. *And London and Sydney.* The source point had split the signal and converged again just before reaching Top in Malta. This was new. Then Fulvia could not be traced through the call. *The chip then, trace the chip. And if that fails . . . activate the chip.*

"Reporting: Trevor Aimes isn't here. Indicators say no one has been here for weeks. Everything's cold except this server. Awaiting orders."  
A beat, and then, "Skim and document. Sweep."  
"Will do."

The underground vault felt oppressive, to whatever extent Top felt anything. A spike of inquiries coursed through the webbed network, via satellite, optic fiber, cable, airwave. *Where is Trevor? Where is Fulvia? 16 hours ago they landed in New York. Where are they now?*

A monitor alert in Berkeley: Prazak's cell phone had just dialed the operator and switched off. Top buzzed the Berkeley team, "Confirmed, that's his phone. Let me speak to him. Remember, no scene."  
"Reporting: Andel Prazak isn't here. His cell phone was just lying on his desk . . . partly cleared desk. Indicators say he was here very recently. Awaiting orders."  
Two beats, and then, "One stay -- skim and document; destroy any pulps or papyrus. The rest spiral immediately, five mile. Report."  
"Will do."

If it were possible, Top was experiencing anger and frustration. In any case, Top was spinning.

\*\*\*

"The good news is that Professor Prazak is on his way in." Trevor's scowl gave way to surprise, even hope. "And the other good news is that Ms. Fiend Rossi is on her way out."

Alarmed, Trevor blurted out, "Fulvia? But I need her. I may need her."

"I think Interpol may need her, but what you need is a lot of not-her."

"Is Interpol coming?"

"Interpol is here. Didn't you see them on your way here?" asked Tracey, indicating where Trevor had come in.

He sprang to the door. "No, where? Interpol needs to know about this database. Because GLOBAL sure knows their database, inside and out. I saw stuff--" Tracey joined him in the doorway, then waving Trevor in one direction as she headed in the other, she called over her

shoulder, "With Grandma, a woman shorter than me, black uniform."

At each end, the corridor curved gracefully and ended in stairs. Downstairs they saw each other and, near the center of this hallway, the two women, startled from their hushed conversation outside a door. Theresia signalled Trevor to come quietly, then caught sight of Tracey.

## **Chapter 28 (written by Kathleen Gatcliffe)**

Neely dozed at her desk and didn't notice the man's advance until she felt his sharp thump on the back of her head. She cried out and spun around, but it was only Cory, her immediate supervisor. He was an obnoxious couch potato, totally lacking in social skills or reasonable hygiene, and he had a crush on her. So he wouldn't report her to anyone who mattered. She yawned and stretched.

Cory leaned against her desk, slouched in a way that she knew he thought was seductive. It wasn't. Neely glared but inwardly cringed; his daily attempts to flirt were the primary fuel behind her frequent Craig's List job searches. The problem with working for an insanely secret organization was that a girl had a tough time getting anyone to agree to be a reference. And she was required to say she worked not for GLOBAL, but for its cover organization, 'Jiggle Wiggle Spam Services.' She couldn't get a car loan, or even look her parents in the eye at Thanksgiving, with that as her cover.

She sighed, and Cory twitched his long, curly eyebrows at her.

"Yo, sleeping beauty," he said. "Word from the Top. Get it? From the top?"

Neely slumped and rested her temple in her hand. Maybe it was time to go back to graduate school. "Cory, that joke's been made, like, thirty times already today. Twenty of those times by you."

"Yeah but this time it's true. So it's cooler." He smacked his lips.

"Yeah? So what does 'it' want with us, finally?"

Cory leaned close. Neely scrambled back but she could not escape the smell of dill pickles and onions issuing from his rancid maw.

"Doasyoulike," he said. "Water bayyyyyyy-beeeeeeee."

"Uh-huh," she said, wrinkling her nose. "You're gross."

He sat up and grumped. "That's the code word. You're supposed to know what that means. And you're supposed to know the counter code. I could write you up for this."

"Cory, I've worked here five years, and in all that time, I've never had to do anything. I forgot the stupid codes, ok? There's only, like, one hundred of them."

Cory stood up and pulled a tattered, Hawaiian shirt-shaped post-it out of his front left jeans

pocket. He read off of it,

"The Water Baby procedure. Code word, doasyoulike. Employees should respond with, bedonebyasyoudid. Then they scramble the database pointers, all of them."

Neely cocked her head. "That's nuts, that's going to bring society to a standstill. This applies to everybody? Not just me?"

"Yep. I would not want to be an average Joe today." Corey pretended to scrutinize the card (Neely could tell, he was a lousy actor) before he continued. "And it says one more thing. You should go out with me tonight." He leaned so close that Neely could feel his stubble graze her cheek.

She pushed off hard against the floor and her chair's wheels carried her across the cubical. She slammed into her semi-ironic 'Hang in There' dangling kitten poster and could hear it crumple. Dang, she thought, that was vintage and in mint condition.

She stood up and shook her finger at Cory. "Y'know, if GLOBAL wasn't so damn secret, I could sue for sexual harassment!"

Corey sauntered to the doorway. He looked over his shoulder at her, "You know you want me." He blew her a kiss and then was gone.

Neely grabbed a can of air freshener and squirted it for a good 30 seconds in his direction, then pulled her chair back over to her computer. She shut down her MySpace page and her blog. She ignored the accumulated IMs from her friends (mostly bored low levels at other secret organizations). She cracked her knuckles and opened the Waterbabies interface. She had actually tried to read the story it was based on once, when she first started and actually thought working for GLOBAL would be exciting, but found it too sickly sweet to appeal even to her detached PoMo brain.

She entered her pass code into the computer and it responded by opening a database. There were millions of files there, arranged without rhyme or reason, and the only thing that kept them sensible was the millions of pointers. It was a terribly ineffective system, but when she tried to tell Cory that, he had barked at her. "Ever think that maybe that's the way it's supposed to be?"

Guess so, she thought. Because the one thing it makes easy is screwing it all up.

All around her, she heard the clattering of keyboards as the five hundred odd employees of the GLOBAL archive yanked their pointers.

This can't be undone, she thought. If I do this, it's going to take decades to sort all this out.

She shrugged, grinned mirthlessly, and whispered aloud, "At least it's job security."

She scrambled her pointers, just as Nigel popped his adorable dark head over her cubical wall.

"Hey, a bunch of us are going to the break room to watch the news and see what happens. Want to come?"

Now this was the kind of guy she would follow anywhere. The second great tragedy in her life (GLOBAL was the first) was that she suspected that he had a girlfriend.

"Sounds like fun," she said and grabbed her cloak from the back of her chair before she hurried to his side. "What's this all about anyway?"

Nigel rolled his eyes. "Some guy tried to get into the files, tried to wipe them or something. So Top's decided to take his anger out on the world."

\*\*\*\*\*

The first place affected was Herb's Maxx Power Natural Foods and Supplements in Duluth. A mere nanosecond before the rest of the world. There, amidst the energy drinks and protein powders, a locally famous personal trainer was stymied as he tried to restock his clients' supply of energy bars.

"Why isn't my card working!" he demanded.

The young cashier, the owner's delinquent niece, took the credit card from the red-faced man. "Maybe it's demagnetized, or maybe you're not swiping it right. I'll punch it in." She hit the keys on her register with long, lacquered blue nails and smiled reassuringly. "It's going in now."

She returned the man's card as her register beeped. She turned to it, puzzled.

"Now that's odd. I think it's saying your card is denied." She stared at the screen, where a lengthy message scrolled.

The man blustered. "That's outrageous. I never carry a balance on this card."

She read aloud in a hushed voice. "Neither a borrower nor a lender be."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It's like a famous quote isn't it? By Benjamin Franklin or someone like that."

"Well, what does it have to do with me?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I'd better call the manager."

\*\*\*\*\*

It was hard not to laugh at the newscasters. Everyone from Neely's floor was gathered around the set as the frantic talking heads tried to make sense of the situation. Someone had brought over a bottle of whiskey, good stuff, and they were drinking shots.

"We think this is the work of hackers, many, many thousands of hackers," said a well-groomed man on the set. His suit matched his 'touch-of-gray' hair perfectly.

His perky blonde co-host interrupted. "What about terrorists? Could they have sabotaged us on such a massive scale? We're standing by for word from the White House."

Meanwhile, the 'news crawl' ran through a small list of disasters. Chaos erupted at the New York Stock Exchange when the stock prices were replaced by numbers in the Fibonacci sequence. Teenagers wept in confusion as their text messages transformed to Elizabethan poetry. Academics participating in an international teleconference on String Theory found

the feed replaced with a loop of video footage starring cats using toilets.

The information technologists raised their glasses, and whooped.

Neely leaned close to Nigel's ear and said, "We really shouldn't find this funny."

He whispered back. "I know. It's like being a nuclear weapons designer, you don't want your bombs to ever go off, but in a weird way... you do. Besides, no one's going to be hurt, not really. Inconvenienced yes, but ... it's their fault for becoming overly dependant on the data."

She turned to look into his face, so close to her own. His eyes were warm brown, and he had a dimple in his left cheek when he smiled. Neely felt giddy.

Meanwhile, a girl from their floor, Dianne, had jumped on a table in front of the television and was shouting for quiet. She had her cell phone to her ear and listened intently as she beckoning everyone to settle down. When they had, somewhat, she tried to explain.

"Watch the screen," she said, gasping for breath between giggles. "Polly on 2nd figured out that she has control of the news feed. She's going to scramble. In two."

Dianne jumped off the table. Everyone got quiet. The newscaster, a handsome young hot shot, was reading off the teleprompter. "It is believed that an unknown virus has infected the databases of thousands, possibly millions of computers. It is recommended that you take precautions and disconnect all media from any and all networks twas brillig and the slithy toves," he stopped, blanched, and looked around wild eyed, before continuing. "Uh, we appear to be experiencing technical difficulties."

Nigel whispered to Neely, "He mispronounced slithy. It's supposed to be said like lithe."

Somehow this was so extraordinary that she grabbed his head and kissed him hard on the mouth. He did not resist.

In the background she could hear her coworkers screaming the words from the news crawl.

"I was a child and she was a child,  
In this kingdom by the sea;  
But we loved with a love that was more than love -  
I and my Annabel Lee!"

Life was good, Neely thought, as Nigel's arm settled over her shoulder. We're all going to heck, but it's gonna be a fun ride.

\*\*\*\*\*

Fulvia fell ill. Her head ached, but also her stomach. Light and noise made things worse; she kept her eyes squeezed shut and her hands over her ears. She wanted to moan, but the vibration it caused in her ribcage intensified the urge to vomit.

It felt like her thoughts and experiences were being wrung from her head. One of the other agents had warned her about this, in the beginning, about the microchip implanted in her skull. If she was no longer needed, or had disappointed GLOBAL in any way, it would toast her brain. Not enough to kill her, but enough to cause such excruciating pain that she would be unable to speak, or write, or indicate in any way what she knew or experienced. She would be a vegetable, forever, unless someone knew to look for the implant and remove it,

but chances were good that even if they got it out, she'd lose a lot of functionality.

Why had she agreed to this? She cursed her younger self. Why had she become involved in a group so wicked they would cripple their own agents?

She remembered the day she got the rejection letter from INTERPOL. She was a fresh young graduate student, too fresh it seemed. The official reason was 'personality mis-match,' but she felt that she knew the real reason: they had turned her away for being too nice.

At the interview she had dressed carefully in a tartan skirt and a cream colored blouse with a fluffy bow at the neck. Her former sorority sisters helped with her makeup, powder blue eye shadow and neon pink cheeks. They twisted her hair up into a sideways ponytail. At the time she thought she looked chic, but in hindsight she knew she looked like a tarted up teenager.

When she was asked if she was prepared to kill in the line of work she nodded, but added that she hoped it wouldn't be necessary. The interviewer's face didn't register any change, but she could tell he was disappointed. So she hurriedly added that she had no problem with killing, none at all. His eyes narrowed perceptibly and she grew more flustered. Her responses to his remaining questions grew more aggressive, but she could tell that the man had already dismissed her, was just going through the ropes.

"Is this really what you want to do?" he asked, a curious inflection on the word 'really.'

She stammered in reply, and a quick flick of his eyelashes showed her that they were done.

As she left the building she bumped into a dark woman in black leather who cursed and hurried away.

That's what an agent should be like, Fulvia thought to herself. Cool and collected. And here I'm dolled up like a teenybopper.

She bought a new outfit that same day, a flame red spandex catsuit adorned with steel spikes around the neck and wrists. She became an expert in mayhem and running in spike heels. She took up smoking, to prove her daring. INTERPOL was a lost cause, but the folks at GLOBAL snapped her up in a second. She didn't care that they were evil; she only wanted an opportunity to prove her toughness. When they mentioned the implant she laughed and shook her luxurious, teased mane. "I'm not afraid," she said in a voice trained to be low and seductive.

A jolt of pain brought her out of her reverie and she flailed on the floor. The pressure in her head was increasing, but she felt at peace, able to reflect on her career at last. She realized that she might have been wrong about the reason for her disqualification.

Maybe they could see how insecure I am, she thought. Maybe they could tell I was so desperate for attention that I'd strangle a basketful of puppies just to be told, 'job well done.' That's the kind of thing that makes a person perfect for GLOBAL.

Someone touched her arm and she cried out. She wanted to reach out, to apologize for the evil she'd done and take comfort in another's embrace, but she could not unfold her limbs. The person whispered, she could tell they meant to be gentle, but the sound tore through her aching skull like a bullet.

## Chapter 29 (written by Alan Drake Davis)

The closed group sat on couches and high backed chairs arranged in a tight circle in Theresia's private living quarters. She sat back, steeply reclined in her personal lazy-boy. She did not move and appeared to be breathing in shallow, long-threaded breaths. Trevor was sitting in a high, straight-backed chair. Next to him was Tracy, sitting in a broad love seat with Fulvia, whose head rested against a large pillow, with her eyes closed. Tracy was holding Fulvia's hand as she gently stroked her former adversary's upper arm. Gerhardt sat upright in a cushionless wooden chair opposite them, next to Theresia.

Pierre was holding up a large speaker phone so all could hear the clear, dulcet accent of Professor Prazak. He was speaking from the WorldCon jet rushing him eastward from California. "I searched the various pieces of papyrus over and over. I just couldn't focus any more, it was time to take a nap. I woke just a few minutes ago, took a swig of their horrid coffee and looked again. It hit me. How stupid I'd been. The messages were the same every time; the motif was repeated again and again: little ancient jokes thrown at me. No matter how I turned a phrase, they were the same. No matter what language I might have suspected these were translations from, the same message came through over and over: 'These words contain no secret,' or 'The mystery is not in this script,' or 'The words themselves are but messages, keys to some mystery.' And on and on and on." There was a moment of silence, with sounds of rustling.

"Stupid coffee spilled all over me! Wait! Okay... And then it struck me. These are translations of translations! It's not the messages, it's the..."

"Prazak! What are you talking about? Translations? Messages?" Trevor attempted to interrupt him and so no one could hear what the professor was saying.

Dr. Prazak continued. "I'll try a different track. I hope you don't mind me saying that I am happy to announce that I do not have to meet with you. I would appreciate you allowing me to go home again and get back to doing what is really important."

"Yes, Prazak, we know: your own work. Ours is —well, of small consequence. We're trying to establish a green earth and world peace. After all, a small piece of papyrus that—."

Prazak jumped in. "I'm telling you that the papyrus is but a messenger." Now it was the professor's chance to interrupt Trevor. "Before papyrus there was cuneiform, as you know. But it's my guess that it's not the cuneiform cylinders either that you're looking for, wherever they are. Do you know where they are?"

"I know who has them, but, shall I say, you're better off not knowing who those people are. You're better off remaining an... an innocent research authority. Anyway, okay, we'll bite, What crazy theory have you come up with this time?"

Again a moment of silence. But this time there was no spilled coffee. "Just as the Egyptians stored bits of body parts and organs and all such in jars, it's quite possible that—."

"You have to be kidding me Prazak!" Trevor shouted.

"I'm not kidding anyone. It's not what's **on** the cuneiform tablets, it's what's **in** them."

"What is he talking about, Trevor?" Tracy asked.

"For some absurd reason, good Professor Prazak—"

"Do you need me anymore?" the Professor asked.

"Thank you," Trevor said. "Go home. The plane's yours for the day. We'll contact the pilot."

The phone went dead, but Prazak's energetic, matter-of-fact voice continued to echo through the room.

Meanwhile, at Theresia's nod, Pierre closed up the wireless phone and carried it out of the room. He closed the door noiselessly.

"It's clear that Global has the cuneiform cylinder." Tracy said. "And the sample of, of, of..."

inside it."

"Human remains," Trevor finished Tracy's sentence matter-of-factly.

"We **must** to Malta to meet with Global directly," Tracy blurted, her mind racing. "If I'm correct, if there is viable ancient DNA in those tablets, it holds the key to resolution without conflict. We cure the family curse and we establish a peace."

"No," Trevor said emphatically. Malta is not a good idea. Not at all."

"Facing this directly is the only solution," Tracy spoke emphatically.

The room fell into an uneasy silence.

A few minutes passed by and Gerhardt turned towards Elder, an imploring look on his face.

Theresia offered in reply, an equally silent, imperceptible side to side shake of her head.

"Any other ideas Tracy?" Trevor asked.

Tracy sat back, looking directly down to Fulvia's limp hand resting in hers, there in her lap. Who would have thought. Their fingers were entwined. A former nemesis sat content and soothed beside her, shedding the years of rejection and remorse.

Tracy spoke, with apparent impulsivity. Her firm, assured voice, made it clear to everyone that she was in command of herself, prepared for anything. She spoke warmly. "What do you think Fulvia? Is there anything you can suggest?"

"Meet them on Lampedusa. The twin-layered, complex architecture of Malta is a labyrinth, a dangerous trap, even if there were time to map out a strategy. Beneath the city... is deep and dark. It's Global's hive and you will be stung. Again and again."

Theresia broke her silence. "Yes, Fulvia has it exactly. Lampedusa is the perfect spot, remote but accessible. There is a small Missous villa on Lampedusa —on the northeast coast."

"In a private cove, if I remember correctly," Trevor added. "We can land in Sicily and take a small plane into the Aeroporto Di Lampedusa."

"There's no need for that," Gerhardt interjected. "No reasons for stopovers. I've set things up. We have a jet small enough to land on Lampedusa's strip." He stood up and walked directly towards the back door of the room. Hesitating for a moment, with his left hand on the handle, he turned to Theresia and said, "I imagine this constitutes my encounter with the final blind yogi, sir." With a brief swallow, he added, "Excuse me, I mean, madam." He smiled and left the room.

"Everyone. Everyone here is going. Be ready in ten minutes." said Trevor. "With the exception of Pierre, of course."

"No, Pierre will be going with me," Theresia said.

"You're going?" Trevor asked.

"To the island, not the villa," Grandmother Theresia answered. "The two of you will handle things perfectly. I am certain."

"What about the access codes, Trevor?" Tracy asked.

"I can work on the codes on the plane. You sleep. I work."

"You're going to kill yourself!" She said. "You need rest. I'll have no reversals at this juncture."

"You'll have!" Trevor laughed. "Just one day, and this will all be over," Trevor said chillingly.

"Before you prepare to leave, I must speak openly to you all," Theresia said commandingly.

Trevor's torso leaned backwards and inch or two and his face assumed a guarded mien.

"I have withheld a truth from you," she began.

The back door to the room suddenly opened and Gerhardt walked in, catching the very end of Theresia's sentence.

"I have withheld the truth from each of you," she looked about the room slowly, lingering on each face benevolently, making it clearly apparent that that the room did not contain a

group of isolated individuals, but instead each person was on equal footing and each would be holding the fate of each other in their hands. Her gaze lingered on Fulvia. "Yes, you too, my precious granddaughter."

Fulvia's eyes widened and she began to cry. "I—." Tracy held Fulvia close to her, stroking her hair.

"Please wait, my darling, it will all make sense in just a moment," Theresia said. "I will put this simply. Trevor, you will understand why you were not named after my son. Tracy, you will understand why I was always distant from you. Gerhardt, you will know why I continued to trust you, even when you rarely trusted yourself. And you, Fulvia, will understand, even though so much was hidden from you, why you took the path you never really wanted to take.

"Here within a single truth, a multitude of mysteries are laid open. Some we share and some are uniquely our own. I will reveal one. And that one will open a door to many. You will open them together, but only together.

"I will now speak directly of my son, T. M. His name was not Trevor Missous, as you suspected, Trevor." She gasped for a breath, as if it were her last. A deep and profound breath, filled with remorse and fear and sadness and hope. "Yes, he was T. M. But his name is Topolous Missous..."

"Top!" Fulvia gasped and then murmured in a whisper, "My father."

"And the remains that must be in the cylinder or cylinders are in his possession," Theresia went on to say, "can only be ancient Missous flesh. Pure and untainted. Even Top does not know that. None of us knew that here we would find the cure to the Missous madness."

The room was suddenly quiet.

"Excuse me," Trevor ventured to speak. "How are we to arrange the meeting?"

Theresia answered: "Everything is set in place. The meeting has long been arranged; we simply need to announce the location. By the time we're in the air, Control will know where they need to be: Lampedusa. As I've said, I'll be flying with you, but I will not be attending. It's now up to you, Tracy and Trevor. Once we've landed, I'm headed south, to Isola dei Conigli, the 'Island of Rabbits.' Pierre will make certain I arrive. The diminishing loggerheads will be hatching. I've been meaning to go before I die."

## **Chapter 30a - a version of the end (written by TBOL3) - unedited**

"What is happening?", he asked.

"Well, we suspect that a virus has been put in the computer system around the world", answered the other.

At the Pentagon several computer geeks were trying to figure out what had happened to the computers around the world. However they were having no luck. GLOBAL had there computers secure. There was no possible way of understanding what was going on.

"I want to know what is going on here, I want to know who planted this 'virus' in the first place", said the one who asked the first question you have read in this chapter. We shall refer to him as Colonel Fredrick.

At another terminal, a technician known as Mr. Jones, found a piece to the puzzle. "You're going to want to see this Colonel Fredrick", he said.

Colonel Fredrick came, "What is it?", he asked.

\*

Top was in his office when the man came in.

"The final stage is complete", he said, "All you have to do is press a button."

"Excellent", said Top, "Those hacker's will never try to get into our system again, or they, and everyone else will pay."

\*

"Keep working on it", said Colonel Fredrick, "with any luck, we will have those hackers caught and punished!"

The peace of the puzzle was actually not that great, it only said one thing.

Stop searching for the answer.

This bit of text was not a puzzle piece. However it's source was. The member of GLOBAL made a big mistake. Instead of sending it to the Pentagon's main server and disconnecting, the text was sent directly to Mr. Jones' terminal. The location of the message was not in plane site, there were still several connections to break, and a few cyphers to hack, but now it would be possible to find the origin of the message.

\*

"YOU WHAT!!!", yelled the supervise of Ms. , the women who made the mistake.

"O no," she thought, "I'm doomed."

The supervisor left to go inform his officers of what happened.

\*

Fulva was in the seat of the plane. She still couldn't believe what she had heard. She was actually related to all of the people! That plus the fact that GLOBAL had abandoned her set her over the edge. She decided that she needed to do something, anything to repay the world for what she had done. "Trever", she said.

"What?", he asked.

"Remember when those marshins attacked you?", she asked.

"Wait, how do you know about that, it was only a dream?", he said.

"That wasn't a dream", she said.

"OK, then what happened? And why don't I see any marshins?", he asked.

"The marshins died, as I told you, they couldn't stand our atmosphere. But as for it appearing to be a dream, that can be entirely accounted for by you genetic problem", she said.

\*

"We found the origin of the message!" Yelled Mr. Jones.

Colonel Fredrick came rushing to see it. On the screen was the number...

The power went out.

"What happened!", yelled Colonel Fredrick.

"They must have shutdown our power, I can't believe how much control they have", said Mr. Robinson, another technician on the team.

"Whatever it is, I want this building up and running again!", yelled the Colonel.

\*

Top read the message that had just appeared on his terminal.

They have discovered our secret, there power is shutdown, we prepare a message for them if they come looking for us.

Top started typing a message, he had hoped it wouldn't come to this, but he knew his plan would have to take action.

\*

"So why did you decide to tell us this?", asked Tracey.

"That would explain those missing agents", said Grayhardt.

Fulva then told everyone one the plain why she has stopped working for GLOBAL, "I won't blame you if you don't trust me, I am unstable, you can lock me up in a little dark room."

Trever said, "We won't do that, yet."

"So why is this important to us? If the martions are dead, and there is no more DNA to use, what do we have to worry about?", asked Tracey.

"There was more then just DNA", said Fulva.

\*

Mr. Jones had just figured out what happened. He went to tell the Colonel what was had happened.

"I think I know what caused this power outage. Just before the power went out, all of the computers started drawing three times as much power then they usually do."

"How would that have caused the power to fail?", asked the Colonel.

Mr. Jones said, "Our breaker can only have so much power, if too much power goes through it, it will cut the cercit. So all we need to do is flip the switch. But--"

"But what!" said Colonel Fredrick.

"What's to stop them from doing it again? The moment we get power back, we need to wright down that IP address."

"I want the power back, AND that address", said Colonel Fredrick.

\*

"They also found the location of a planet, just a few light year's away, that might support human life", said Fulva.

"OK, but how does this affect us?", asked Greyhardt.

"Well, supposedly at high gravity, or speeds near the speed of light, time is actually supposed to slow down, or speed up. If we had a ship going fast enough, we might just make it there, but a ship like that doesn't exist", said Tracey.

"The FR29B!", said Greyhardt.

"What?", asked Trever.

"It's a ship WorldCon's been building, it's supposed to get near light speed", said Teresa.

"Where is this ship?", asked Trever.

"Just a few blocks away from where we will be landing", said Greyhardt.

\*

Mr. Robinson had just pulled the switch. And just as Mr. Jones predicted, the power came back on. Within minutes, the terminal had the IP address on the screen. It was

218.382.5.1

Just as it was copied down, the computers went offline, This time only the computers, not the power.

"NO!!!", yelled the Colonel.

Just as he finished saying one terminal started up. On it was a single line, which read.

If you like you're planet, don't try to find us.

\*

The plain landed, and everyone but Teresa got off. Then, it took off with Teresa.

"Were of to see GLOBAL, the wonderful GLOBAL of earth", said Trever.

\*

A message appeared on Top's terminal.

They have just arrived.

"Excellent, let's give him a little greeting", said Top.

\*

"What happened now," said Colonel Fredrick, why was getting very tired of this.

"They've taken over our network", said Mrs. Davidson. "However, I think that if we completely unplug the entire building from the network, we will be able to start up the computer's again."

"Do it", said the Colonel.

\*

A man walked into Top's office, "Sir, we've just lost control of the pentagon", he said.

"Very well, get me the activator", he said.

\*

The computer's were up and running again.

Mr. Jones said, "I can find the physical location of the computer that sent the message, but we are going to have to reconnect to the network."

"How long will it take to get the location?", asked the Colonel.

"About 10 maybe 15 minutes", said Mr. Jones.

\*

They had just arrived at the spot designated. There was a GLOBAL agent there.

"Hello", he said.

\*

"I have it!", said Mr. Robinson.

"Where is it?", asked the Colonel.

"Malta!", he said.

Colonel Fredrick picked up the phone, and said, "The source of all the trouble is in Malta, whoever, or whatever it is. I would recommend sending 50,000 troops there, bye."

\*

"You came hear for the cylinder, and you can't have it", said the agent.

"Very well", said Tracey, as she started to leave. But just then about 50 more agents came out of the bushes.

"Nor can you go", said the agent.

The meting, as you can see, did not go well.

\*

The troops were on there way to Malta. The plain was a fast one, they would be there in a few hours.

\*

Top was still in his office. But then X45, one of his most trusted agents, came in.

"Your ship is ready sir", he said.

I'll be there in a minute.

\*

"So, Grayheardt, do you have any great plans on getting us out of this one?", asked Trever.

"Actually, yes, I do", he said. As he said that, he show the ground below his feet. A crack appeared, and in a flash, our heroes were gone.

\*

A message appeared on Top terminal.

They have escaped.

"NO!!!", he yelled, then he got up, and went to his ship.

\*

Trever, Tracey, Greyhardt, and Fulva were in an underground cave, but it looked more like a big library.

"Alright Trever, you didn't get a chance to crack the codes on the plane", said Greyhardt, "figure them out here."

Trever sat down to a laptop, and started it up.

\*

The troops had finally arrived. And they started searching the area. There was no chance that they would not eventually find GLOBAL headquarters.

\*

"I've got it!" Trever said, he had spent the last 3 hours working the codes. Trever quickly typed in all the needed codes.

Username: FL3dv%R

Password: \*\*\*\*\*  
Other Password: \*\*\*\*\*  
Organization: Late Rabbit  
Enter (Y/n): n  
Command: The Queen  
Permission Granted

"Alright I'm in", he said, "I have full access."

\*

"Sir, someone is on our system!", said X45.

"Destroy their user name, kill there access!", Top said.

"I can't, they have root privileges, they are higher then admin", said X45.

*That's what you get for using the leading brand*, thought Top, "Fine, can I talk to them?"

\*

Trever's screen went blank, only for a second. Then a picture of a man appeared.

"Hello Trever, I am Top."

"What do you want?", asked Trever.

"See this", said Top, pulling out a remote, "This is a sinister devise to destroy the world. Now I will have control of the world, or the world will not exist, am I clear?"

"Yes", said Trever.

Top started to put the remote away, but then a loose wire shocked him. He dropped the remote. The remote landed upside down, and with it's buttons pressed.

The computer in the background said, "10 minutes till Armageddon."

"Stop it", said Trever, "You win."

"I can't, it's not a timer, that's an estimated time until the Earth goes critical, and explodes", said Top "Anyway, I'm off to my rocket, good bye Earth."

The screen went blank and the screen Trever was last on reappeared, but now, a big clock was at the top.

\*

The solders broke into the base, just in time to see the ship launch.

"8 minutes till Armageddon", said the Computer.

"What's that", asked a General, "Stop it."

\*

Trever had tried to stop the clock, but Top was right, there was no way of stopping it, not in the time left.

"Alright Trever, times up, let's go to the ship!", said Grayhardt.

"Where is it?", asked Tracey.

"It's in this cave", said Grayhardt.

\*

"Sir, there is no way of stopping it, in 4 minutes, the world will explode!", said a sargent.

"I need to tell the world the end is here", said the general.

"Yes sir", said the sargent, as he was saying that, he used GLOBAL's computer's, to take control of every TV, every Radio, every Computer, and anything else they could gain control of.

"Friends...", began the general.

\*

The rocket blasted off, and just as it was out of Earth's atmosphere, the world exploded.

"Six billion people dead", said Tracey.

"There has to be some way to restore it", said Fulva.

"Why did Top decide to control the world?", asked Trever.

"I don't know", said Greyhardt, "but if we have any chance of fixing our mistake, it's on this new world, we must stop him there. That is the only chance of the human race surviving."

"What are you going to do now, Trever", asked Tracey.

"I don't know", said Trever, "but for now, I need sleep."

\*

And so, the two rockets headed out to the location of this new planet, the last chance for human survival, the last chance to solve THE MYSTERY!!!

To Be Continued...

## **Chapter 30b - a version of the end (written by Michael Sirois)**

The lights flashed by overhead as the group sped along, eighty feet under the river, toward

The Order's outbuilding on the other side of the Hudson. Looking out the rear window, Trevor watched the tunnel fall back into darkness after they passed by. All along the sides of the tunnel he could see the massive pipes that supplied water, power and fuel to the compound, as well as carrying away the compound's waste products. It was ingenious, really. Aside from trips for food, which were made in one of The Order's unstylish SUV's, other necessities were delivered or routed to their metalworks factory, located just north of Germantown, and piped under the Hudson to the compound.

The metalworks factory had been a cover operation for The Order since World War II, when it actually did manufacture sheet metal for B-15 bombers. Bought out by Charles once the war ended, he gradually replaced the workers with Order personnel, continued a profitable business, making siding for houses, and put skilled teams to work building the tunnel and readying the island, which he had also bought, for habitation. It became the primary headquarters for The Order during the Cold War, a time of heightened rivalry between The Order and GLOBAL. It had served them well, and had been a perfect place for Tracey to administer treatments to Trevor, as well as a good spot to incarcerate Fulvia, although that didn't seem to be necessary anymore.

The team that would be going to Lampedusa was small, aside from Tracey and Trevor, just two of The Order's best agents – one of whom was a techie – plus Fulvia and Grayson would debark at the airport. Pierre and Theresia would slip from the plane once it had been hangared, just in case Top decided to try anything at the airport, and they would head south for the Isola dei Conigli to see her beloved turtles. Trevor looked around the SUV, from face to face, examining them, trying to read the emotions most of them weren't showing. Despite the outward calm everybody was displaying, a palpable undercurrent of tension and nervousness still made its presence known. Great-grandmother Theresia was the only one who seemed to truly welcome the end of the journey ahead. Trevor had noticed, back at the compound, how she smiled at the mention of the cuneiform cylinder, and had urged them to meet Top on Lampedusa.

Trevor still couldn't believe the changes he'd noticed in Fulvia since Tracey removed the chip from her head. And in Tracey. Even before Great-Grandmother Theresia had revealed that Fulvia was their aunt, Tracey had seemed protective of her – a doctor/patient thing, perhaps, or maybe a sixth sense of connectedness.

The chip had been inserted in Fulvia's sternocleidomastoid muscle just below the point where it attaches to the mastoid process, at the base of her skull. Once Tracey realized the chip was what was causing the intense pain Fulvia was feeling, she decided to remove it. The medical training she had received as part of her genetics training included a little surgery, and she felt she could handle it. If she was careful, she should be able to open the muscle and remove the chip, as long as she was sure to miss the occipital and the superior thyroid arteries, both of which ran along the muscle. A slip of the scalpel, and Fulvia could easily bleed to death in minutes. Fortunately, the compound was well equipped for surgeries, and after administering some mild anesthesia, Tracey was able to remove it successfully. Fulvia's neck would be sore, and her movement a little restricted for a week or so, but she wouldn't be bothered anymore with whatever kind of impulse GLOBAL had been zapping her with.

At any rate, she seemed much calmer now, most of that tension and bravado that had made her seem so alluring had faded. She looked softer now, less exciting, but more interesting, more real. It was thanks to her that they were going to finally square off with Top and have a chance to put the plan in action. Using Trevor's hacking skills, they were able to get a signal through the GLOBAL network for Top to call Fulvia. The message was that she had turned Trevor, that he now saw how futile it was to compete against this system that was

currently wreaking havoc across the globe, and that he wanted to join forces.

Top would be suspicious of the call, of course, certain that it could be a trap, but everyone hoped his ego would get the better of him. He was to call the number of a specially designed secure phone that The Order's electronics crew had been working on for nearly a decade. The original design was intended to be used as a scrambler for secure face-to-face conversations, preventing other agents from eavesdropping on you with remote microphones or bugs. As the design developed, they could see that it might have some other uses, and one in particular that intrigued Trevor. It involved transmitting data disguised as the received signal from a remote location.

The phone call did come, and The Order's techies didn't try to shunt the signal through too many channels. They allowed GLOBAL's system to track the signal – through a series of poorly disguised decoys – back to the compound. Fulvia was very convincing, letting Top believe that his massive data scramble had convinced Trevor that the world would be powerless against GLOBAL, and that he felt he couldn't compete against them. Top agreed to meet with them, and suggested either Malta or the island of Lampedusa. They agreed to call him back when they were underway. Theresia suggested that Lampedusa would be the safer of the two, for reasons she understood if no one else did, and so they agreed.

When Top was speaking, his digital signal was mirrored much in the same way that noise cancelling microphones and headphones operated. The duplicate signal, in effect, became invisible, an undetectable channel to send data in small packets back to the source of the original sound. If they could get the right data embedded somewhere in GLOBAL's system, it could be all they need to turn the tables on Top. The downside was that they would have to be at GLOBAL's headquarters to carry out the rest of the plan, and that would probably mean certain death if they didn't succeed.

At this point, Trevor really didn't care if he lived or died. He was still sorting out the real from the unreal, and the image he found hardest to purge from memory was that of Hazel dying in a hail of bullets. Hazel, even though she had been a figment of his imagination, had seemed so much like Rebecca that he had mentally brought back the dead, not realizing he had been trying to do that for the last twenty years anyway. He needed to trust what was true, but he wanted a different truth than the one his mind and everyone around him was telling him was real. He had been through so much that death would certainly be easier, but leading everyone else into the lion's den wasn't right either. He knew this had to be done, but actually accomplishing it would be another matter altogether.

Before long, they were in the air. The phone call to Top was made, and they told him they wanted to meet on Lampedusa. A time and location was agreed on, and Trevor and Fulvia were to come alone. Trevor was exhausted. He tried to concentrate on his codes, but couldn't keep his eyes open. He looked around the cabin. He had to finish restructuring the code before they landed. Who could he trust? His gaze fell on Grayson, two seats forward. He called to him.

"Grayson, could I have a word with you?"

Grayson got up and came back to him. "Of course. What is it?"

"I need to get some sleep, but I have to have this code ready before we land, and I also need some time to work with Malcolm, the tech guy. If I go to sleep, Tracey will want to let me sleep for the whole flight. Promise me you'll wake me up in two hours?"

"Definitely. And Trevor?"

"Yes."

"I'm glad you're on our side."

"Glad to be here. Thanks."

Trevor closed the laptop, and laid the seat back. As tired as he was, it was a struggle to let go and drift off. The weight of the past several weeks had taken its toll, but his body finally succumbed.

Tracey watched Trevor fall asleep, across the aisle from her, and was glad he was finally getting some rest. He would need it to get through the ordeal ahead, she was sure, but she was more concerned about his long-term health. For the gene therapy to work, he would have to take care of himself for the next several months, and he hadn't seemed inclined to do that lately. There was also no guarantee that the therapy would be permanent. She could do so much more with the sample of untainted Missous flesh. Pre-disorder DNA from the same family. Just imagine.

A shape appeared in the aisle. Fulvia sat down beside her, wanting to talk.

"Thank you for what you did back there," she said.

"You were in pain. And how are you feeling now."

"A little sore, but nothing serious. The physical pain is nothing. Sometimes it's the things that others do to you that hurt the worst. I can't believe that my father is Top. It's so Luke Skywalkerish."

Tracy laughed, then quickly clapped her hand across her mouth. "Sorry, I . . ."

"No, it's all right. I meant it as a joke. It's Daddy, I mean Top, that I want to talk to you about."

Tracey waited, not knowing how to respond. Fulvia continued, speaking about the man who – though he was middle aged already when Fulvia was born – was very athletic and agile. She told Tracey about a time, when she was young, on her thirteenth birthday. Topolous Missous had promised to be there for his daughter's birthday party. She didn't understand at the time that her father had two families, and hers was the secondary one. He did arrive at the appointed hour, but was acting strangely, a look of panic in his eyes. Fulvia watched her mother try to manage the situation as her father said strange things – the clown was a spy, aliens tried to paint his office green, the dog ate his foot. Her mother hustled Topolous from the room, but the party broke up soon after that, and Fulvia was the talk of the school and the receiver of odd stares for weeks afterward.

A few days after the party, Fulvia's mother told her that her father was gone on a long business trip, but he would be back. He was gone often, so this didn't seem unusual to her, but she was worried about his strange behavior. He did return, several weeks later – long after the gossip had shifted from her father's behavior to the school's counselor catching Benny Golson and Andrea Marcolli naked together in the girl's restroom, which was much juicier, removing the spotlight from Fulvia and her family.

Her father seemed fine when he returned, happier than he had been in some time. Then he fell ill. He seemed to be very weak, and his skin turned a pale, waxy color after a few

days. He was rushed the hospital, and seemed to be getting worse. One day, after school, she asked her mother to take her to see him, and was told that he had been taken away to a faraway hospital, and they were going to perform a special operation to try to save him and that she must be brave.

Oddly, he returned after another few weeks, and seemed the picture of health. His color was back and he seemed to be talking normally. In the evening, about once a week, he would lock himself in his study for hours, and she thought that was odd, but otherwise he seemed fine. She did notice one behavior in particular that changed, though. He loved to swim, and always started each morning with a swim in their pool, but had stopped doing that since his return this time. She wondered why, but couldn't see any reason for the change. She put it out of her mind, and eventually stopped thinking about it, but began having a dream during those months that didn't stop until she was almost fourteen.

In the dream, she saw her father rising naked from his bed. He had a small black box in his hand, and a wire went from the box up over his shoulder. When he turned around, she could see that the wire was plugged into the back of his neck, and his spine looked all lumpy. The dream disturbed her for some months, and for a while she was convinced that it wasn't a dream at all, that she actually had seen the box and the wires and the lump.

"And that's what I wanted to tell you," she said, finishing her story. "Your operation on me reminded me of it, and now I'm more convinced than ever that it wasn't a dream. I think I know what we need . . . what **I** need to do."

Trevor slept deeply, and would have remained that way long past time to land. Exactly two hours later, though, he was dreaming about a chorus line of chinchillas in four-inch stiletto heels, but they weren't dancing, they were kicking him. As he looked up at his attackers, he noticed they looked oddly like Fulvia, and their nipples hardened as they continued to kick him. One of them leaned over, grabbed his shoulder and said, "Time's up, man. Rise and shine." Trevor opened his eyes to see Grayson standing over him, making sure he woke up.

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Top waited in his darkened office at GLOBAL's base on Lampedusa. He was bathed in the eerie glow of the three flat panel monitors on his desk. On one monitor he was browsing through reports of the panic caused by his brief data scramble the day before. On another he scrolled through a series of e-mails, trying to piece together connections between various GLOBAL employees. The third monitor showed an image of a WorldCon jet landing. The meeting would be soon. He had hated to toss Fulvia aside that way, but it had been necessary. She was weak, and in the hands of The Order. It was quite a surprise to get the signal from Trevor that Fulvia wanted to talk. Either she was more resourceful than he thought, or they were attempting to perpetrate a massive double cross on him. He would be ready either way.

As he reached outward, toward one of the monitors, intending to tilt it toward him a little, the tremors in his hands began again. It was time to re-stream the flow. He pulled a small black device from his desk drawer, untangled the cord dangling from one end of it, and found the plug on the end. It looked very much like the mini plug on a set of headphones. Gripping it between thumb and forefinger, he reached his arm over his shoulder, and with an often-practiced movement, slipped the plug into the jack on the back of his neck, just at the joint between his C1 and C2 vertebrae. The hump of the implant was barely visible, and he took great care to never appear in public shirtless. This had been his routine since the late 1980's when he had realized that the Missou curse had finally surfaced in him. He switched

the device on, and felt a calming warmth spread into his spine and down through his extremities. Soon he would be fine for another few days, although the treatments had grown more frequent in recent years.

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The time on the plane hadn't been wasted. Trevor, with Malcolm's help, had been able to prepare the codes so they could be released at the proper time. He could do that, of course, anytime he was inside the GLOBAL network, and could even have done it remotely, from New York. But they weren't here just to reverse the damage done by Top the day before. They were here for the cylinder. He still wasn't sure he could trust Fulvia, but Tracey seemed to think that Fulvia knew something about the cylinder that would work to their advantage, and she was willing to stick by her. They had discussed the details of their plan in a final twenty minute huddle before the plane landed at Lampedusa, and now it was up to them to execute it.

A black Range Rover was waiting for them at the airport, and Fulvia, Trevor and Tracey slid onto the back seat. Grayson drove, following the directions taped to the wheel. They were sure the vehicle was bugged, so they remained silent during the short trip across the tiny island, arriving at the gate to GLOBAL's compound within ten minutes. A guard looked inside the vehicle briefly, listened to someone on his earpiece, then waved them through.

Security cameras followed them as they passed the guardhouse. Trevor could see their movement executing a slow arc along their path. Suddenly the radio turned on and a voice came though the speakers, "You and Fulvia were told to come alone, Mr. Aimes."

"My sister, Tracey, and I are a team – and Grayson is a trusted friend. He'll stay in the vehicle," Trevor said emphatically.

"Yes, he will," Top replied, the mechanics of the radio unable to hide the amusement in his voice. "Please leave any electronic devices you have with you in the Range Rover, and – though I shouldn't need to say it, I've always wanted to – check your weapons at the door."

"We have no weapons, and we'll leave cell phones and the like with Grayson."

"Excellent."

They pulled up to the main building, and Grayson parked in a particularly well-lit area, as he was instructed. Two heavily armed guards came out to the Range Rover and escorted Tracey, Trevor and Fulvia into the building. Just outside Top's office they thoroughly frisked the three of them. One of the guards seemed to be taking an unusually long time checking Tracey over for weapons or signaling devices. Not finding anything unusual, they knocked on the door. Top told them to come in.

Once inside, the guards positioned themselves inside the room, on either side of the door, just behind the three newcomers.

They had planned carefully on the plane, certain that there would be guards and other difficulties. Now, as they were face to face with the endgame, a quote from *Macbeth* popped into Trevor's head, "''. He couldn't agree more, but the situation would dictate the action.

"Well Fulvia," Top said. "I had given up on you, but it looks like you have done well this time. Trevor, did you honestly think I needed you to work for me? Haven't you seen what

my Chinchilla can do?"

"Chinchilla?" Trevor said, not expecting this at all.

"Yes, I named it after your techniques, which I have been generously borrowing from and improving on for years, thanks to employees I've planted at top research institutions that are using your AI code. We're way beyond anything you had done before you dropped out of sight. Our database is structured after your research on the human brain, but it's the linkages we've established with other major financial, medical and political databases that makes it so powerful. We don't need you."

"Then why allow me to come here?"

"Certainly not to work for me. I just don't want you digging into the Chinchilla and messing it up. You've tried to do that several times over the past few days, and that's a no-no. We're going to have to make sure you don't play with your toys ever again. Neither you nor your sister will leave this compound alive."

Fulvia stepped forward, leaving a gap between Trevor and Tracey. Father, isn't there any way . . .?"

Top roared at her. "Don't you try to talk me out of this, girl! Are you with me or them?" She turned back to Tracey and Trevor for a moment and said "I'm sorry." Turning to Top, head bowed, she said, "Father, forgive me," and silently added "for you know not what I'm about to do."

"Forgive you for what?" Top said, a moment of gentleness showing through his anger.

Lifting her tear-stained eyes to Top, Fulvia held her arms out and went to him, starting to throw her arms around his neck. Her arms stopped at the sides of his head, though, and grasping him firmly, snapped his neck.

The guards shifted as they heard the "Pop" of his C1 vertebrae snapping. Before his dead body even began the slump toward the floor, Tracey and Trevor each placed well-practiced backwards kicks, disabling the guards long enough to remove their weapons and tie them up. As in most real world hand-to-hand combat, no lengthy battle sequence a la Jackie Chan was necessary. No shots were fired, it was all over in seconds, and the guards were gagged and trussed shortly thereafter. It was all up to Tracey now.

Tracey moved to the limp body of Top. Fulvia, unable to stop the tears that were flowing quite freely now, helped her turn the body on its stomach. Knowing they would not be able to bring any weapons inside, Tracey realized she would have to rely on whatever was available. A quick search of Top's desk revealed only a small letter opener, but the edge was fairly sharp, and she knew it would be enough for now.

She first used it to start a rip in the back of Top's shirt, then tearing it open, Tracey examined the lump, about an inch and a half wide by four inches long. It bulged slightly against the skin like there was a small pipe or something underneath. She had to remind herself that this wasn't surgery she was about to perform, and she quickly created a slit along the length of the lump, from the plug at the top down to the base of it. She then made slits along the top and bottom, which allowed her to peel the covering skin and tissue back, revealing a plastic cylinder, which was mounted in place of Top's C2 through C6 vertebrae. His nerves and blood vessels were routed around the outer edge of the cylinder, through plastic tubing. Inside the plastic cylinder Tracey could see the cuneiform cylinder,

the top and bottom of which were attached to the nerves and blood vessels with intricate electronica, too detailed to examine here. She finished quickly with the part she had been dreading, that of separating the cylinder from the spinal column, and they wrapped it in some tissue they found in the desk.

Time to call in the troops. The simple ring Trevor had been wearing had only one purpose, to signal Grayson. The commandos, Theresia's "turtles", had been waiting on the Isola dei Conigli for Theresia's arrival, and had set off in their small landing boats in time to surround GLOBAL's compound. Theresia shouted after them as they set off "I love the sight of turtles in the moonlight!"

When Grayson received the signal from Trevor, he sent two signals himself. One alerted the commandos to attack – which began with well-placed mortar fire and a couple of targeted missile strikes in the far reaches of the compound, far away from Top's offices.

As soon as the first explosion hit, Trevor and Fulvia grabbed the guards' assault rifles and headed into the corridor, Tracey following close behind with the cylinder. As hoped, they received very little resistance because most of the compound's soldiers were running towards the sound of the action. The diversion allowed the commandos to move in quickly and form a cordon around the three of them as they made their way out to the Range Rover, which was apparently now a present from GLOBAL. The strike was over soon, since the main objective was to get Trevor, Tracey and Fulvia out quickly and safely. They were ferried over to the Isola dei Conigli, where they joined Theresia and Pierre until they could board a waiting WorldCon seaplane which took them up to Sicily. A short stop before the journey back to New York.

Over the next few days, the world righted itself again. The scrambles stopped as the worm that Grayson released worked its way through GLOBAL's massive system, and markets and institutions began to restore their systems from their own backups. GLOBAL would, of course, restore the Chinchilla to full operation once they contained the digital cancer spreading through it, so The Order's work wasn't done. There would be plenty to keep them occupied for years to come. For now, though, Trevor, Tracey and Fulvia – new found relatives – wanted to relax at the compound near Catskill, venturing out to Angela's Pancake House occasionally, talking and learning from Theresia, and just basking in the warmth of new friendships.

## **Chapter 30c - a version of the end (Alan Drake Davis)**

All's Well That Ends Well /or/ There's Nothing Like a Dame  
Posted by chinchilla on 15 December 2006 • Private Posting Draft 004

Well, it's been two weeks since the Mediterranean brouhaha. If life hadn't been confusing/mixed up enough over those first befuddling three weeks, the trip to and visit on Lampedusa took the cake. God, am I glad it's over with.

Don't know why I'm bothering to write this. It's like responding to letters from a non-existent Fan Club: the No Fans for Trevor Aimes Non-Fan Club. Tracy suggested I 'work through' things; typing would be good therapy. Dr Holstein said it wouldn't hurt. It's not as

if three days a week with good Dr. Cow has gone to naught. I think I'm getting a handle on it. Well.. I'm thinking I'm getting a handle on it. Tracy of course doesn't need therapy; she's back home in Ithaca with Michael and the kids and everything's as normal as can be. Her normal. How can anything be normal back in Ithaca? Well, I guess it's netter being Odysseus than Oedipus. Oedipus Nix. I have Pierre and Grayson. Like I need guys around me. Ug! Like I need women around me! If only... No, I'm not going there! Yet. It's still too soon to make that real —typing it or not. I've got to get away from computers and typing and making recordings of 19th Century poetry that no one listens to... I've got to 'get a life!' Now I've heard that cultural message too many time lately. Life's degenerated to an intimate relationship with U. S. Cable Television.

Yes. Here I am, back on the Hudson. What the hell am I going to do in this place — with this place? Maybe I can sell it to Donald Trump. No. Even he couldn't afford it. It's not that it isn't beautiful. It's magnificent compared to anyplace I've lived at in Britain. But now all the trees have lost their leaves. When I look up through the spindly branches, the sky is gray. Hey. That's not bad. The wording I mean. If I've vowed not to record any more poems, maybe I should start writing them:

The trees lose there leaves—  
Branches against the grey/gray sky.  
Plop! A cuneiform cylinder bites the dust.

Cripes! I write a poem and the first thing that pops into my head is: "This poem is in the public domain." Bugger. Maybe I should take up hiking in the Catskills.

And Grandmother Theresia gone. It'll be awhile before I can talk about that. For now I'll tell the background. The short of it. She's gone. Enough? left us while watching her beloved loggerheads scamper for the sea. Pierre said she encouraged the stragglers, cheering them on like Olympian champions. She was instrumental in making certain Rabbit Island remained at the very least the last egg laying site for Italy for the Loggerhead Sea Turtle. I am very proud of her. Very. No one will ever know what she's done for this planet. My secretive great, great grandmother. I—.

And "Aunt" Fulvia joining a bowling team! She doesn't waste time. Now, you would think, there's someone who needs therapy, needs a close connection with people. I'm hoping she'll be alright. She surprised me most of all. Or maybe I surprised myself, how quickly, nah, instantly, I forgave her everything. There is something to walking in someone else's moccasins. Grandma "T" was right.

Anyway, I guess I should get to it. (I am... I really am. Here. Now. I'm doing it. Look at me! Watch these dancing fingers do their thing!) All alone. Me. A beautiful Mac. In the homeland of the Mac. And me talking to myself, being my own rooting section: "Type it down, Trevor. Express yourself. Be real. Be realistic. Face the facts in plain black and white." Etcetera. Etcetera. Etcetera.

Crap. Odysseus and Oedipus weren't enough. Now I have Yule Brynner in my living room!

Uh-huh. Tracy. Theresia. Dr. Holstein. Even Fulvia. All saying the same thing. "Spell it out and let it go." Beat me on the head, will you. Let it go. I wish I could let it go. Jeeze, now that I think of it, even my grandfather Topolous hit me with the same bloody message: "You have to step out. Face it, you have intimacy issues, Trevor." That's hysterical. You've got to be kidding. It's like beating a dead horse deader. Don't they see, Becky's gone. What are they thinking?

Oh. Yes. "The Caper," as Tracy and I quickly came to call it. It turned out to be very simple. Not difficult at all. Simple as hell. It was suddenly over. We all looked at each other, shrugged our shoulders and laughed. Maybe that's what's not letting the old chinchilla roll off to rest. Maybe it's all just speed and momentum. You work forever to change the world and then, one morning, on your day-off none-the-less, you take your dog for a walk up the hill, little plastic baggie in one pocket, hand wipes in the other, and suddenly... you notice the world just went ahead and beat you to it: It changed itself. You suddenly realize you're never really in control. But I have to believe I had some influence on things, on how things tuned out.

The trip to the airport was uneventful. The flight over was uneventful. I even got some sleep in the air. Setting in motion the disassembly of Global's master database was suddenly simple and uneventful. (Little did I know it was a simple two man operation. I was getting help.) Landing in Lampedusa was uneventful. The trip to the villa uneventful. Seeing Grandfather Topolous was uneventful. Well, that's not altogether true. I have to say it was a shock to see him flipping channels in the villa Great Room, a cigar in one hand, a sake martini in the other. And no one else. No one anywhere to be found. That simple. That was a moment of supreme unsurity.

And I suddenly realized why Grandma Theresia wasn't there. It couldn't have just been the loggerheads of Rabbit Island. Sure, it was hatching time and she had to do her thing. At a hundred-whatever-she-is, she can do and say whatever she wished. I should live so long. And I very well might, oddly enough... But I'm suddenly ahead of myself.

Top. Grandfather. Grandfather Top. Now there is a tricky guy. Not that Grandmother "T" hadn't been secretly crafty herself. Weaning [I should say preparing] Tracy and me, while secretly plotting with her son. No he wasn't dead. He was the mystery. The two of them pulling, who know, 50 years of accumulated strings that she'd been craftily, secretly putting in place —and with her son! All along. My great grandmother, my grandfather, —the supreme followers of non-violence. It hadn't been easy for him. (I'm presuming. He'll never tell.) Posing as a jerk to the outside world. Acting the puppet within. This has to be the world's longest planned sting. Thirty, forty, fifty years? From what he said, the taciturn bear, he walked the fence every day. Trundling the catacombs and vaulted walls of Malta. Skillfully (my words) avoiding harm to other —and what harm was done, he unflinchingly took the blame. And what harm was done, he took the credit for it. Credit!?! Ha! How he must have been hated and feared. On all sides. He knew how to get the amygdala working. It's a wonder he remained alive.

He knew of the cylinder and the DNA. Even before we knew of DNA. Had to. That was what kept him alive, preventing his end to be as his father's was. And I see, I think, my mother's death as well. He couldn't help her. Family secrets. Everyone has them. A pitiful joke. But what of my father, Quintin Aimes? I asked Top several times, in several ways. He shrugged off each question. Was my father a good man? Did he get in someone's way? Did he die or disappear protecting Tracy and me —or Mom? What is Top protecting us from?

The last I saw of Top was just before he and Pierre left for Rabbit Island Beach. Pierre returned with Grandma "T's" body. I asked Pierre about Top, he motioned his head to the cove below. The boat was gone. As I stood on the patio overlooking the Mediterranean, I thank him. For his brilliant self-sacrifice. And for telling me to let go. Tears were in his eyes.

Sometimes I expect you to pop in any second. Walk through the door. Water ski up the Hudson. Skydive in on a big red sheet. It will never happen.

I'm going to delete this. I have doubts, of course, but I also have work to do. Work that finally makes sense to me. Good-bye, Rebecca.

You knew I was writing to you, didn't you. What did I know? I understand now. Thank you, all. Here I've been trying to make sense of all of this for you. Trying to help you get it.

I know what I have to do. You'll forgive me, my love, I know you will, if in the middle of a busy workday, trying to green-up the world Grandma "T" left in my care, in Tracy's care, if I meet someone overwhelmingly bright and funny and lovely, who can go forward with me —someone to talk with again, like I did once with you. Thank you. I'm going to do this.

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## **Chapter 30d - a version of the end (written by Anita Roy Dobbs)**

When LibriVox wrote its first mystery  
(in National Writing Month history)  
the podcast was sent, (though the plot came and went,) and the heroes were brother-and-sistery.

## **Chapter 30h - a version of the end (written by Kathleen Gatcliffe)**

Sexton Blake lay in the large double bed that dominated his squalid Parisian apartment. His girlfriend Trixie sprawled on her belly beside him, trying to devise a system to play Spider Solitaire with only an incomplete deck of cards. Plump gray rats scratched under the floorboards and flat brown roaches ran up the torn and fading puce wallpaper.

"Ah yes, how to end this thing," Sexton mumbled as he nibbled at his pencil and read over the penultimate chapter of his great novel, 'The Mystery.' It was quite a departure from his usual work, which tended to consist of Sherlock Holmes rip-offs and adventure stories for boys. This was something more, something meaningful and important. It would win critical acclaim, and Sexton knew that favorable reviews from the arbiters of good taste always guaranteed financial success.

"Trixie, my girl," he said, puffed up with pride. "If this thing sells, I'll take you to the 'Isle of Rabbits.'"

His reference to Chapter 29 did not impress her, and she yawned, open-mouthed. "What do I want rabbits for?" she said. "Only good rodent is one made into a fur, my mother always said that. And she should know, she used to play her mandolin on the sidewalk outside Sak's in New York. You say she was a 'busker,' which sounds dirty to me but she was a very

classy lady, my mom was."

"Never mind," Sexton sighed and tried to get back to work.

Trixie threw down her cards in disgust. "I mean, it's not like they're good eating. I had one once, some kind of British rabbit, but it tasted like cheese on toast." She turned her wide eyes toward him and he chuckled.

"That's because it was cheese on toast. That's what Welsh Rarebit is, and that's what you ate." Sexton licked the point of his pencil and wrote the words "Chapter 30 ... some ideas" on the top of the next page in his pad.

"Well whatever it was, it made me feel awfully queer. And such dreams I had that night! Ooooooh!" she snuggled close to her man and looked at his notebook. "Ya working on the story?"

"Yes," he said. "I'm not sure how to end it. I think I'll write a whole bunch of endings and then we can pick the best one. Won't that be fun?"

Trixie squealed and clapped her hands. "I want that girl, you know, the one you made to be like me, uh..."

"Fulvia?"

"Yes, Fulvia. I want her to turn out all reformed and marry a millionaire. 'Cause I like her. She's got spunk." She kissed Sexton on the cheek.

"I'll make a note of it dear, but I'll also probably write at least one where she turns out bad. So that there's variety. In fact, I may even kill her, she did have her brains scrambled you know."

Trixie turned away and sulked. "The future is awfully complicated." She played with the lace of her powder blue negligee for a moment before she continued. "Hey, how about you give me a piece of paper? Maybe I'll write one of those endings for you."

Sexton stared at her in surprise. "Why Trixie! I didn't know you knew how to write." He tore three pages from his notebook and passed them, and a spare pencil, to her.

Trixie took them and settled back down on her stomach, as she muttered, "Yeah, well, there's a lot you don't know about me."

The two worked quietly for a few minutes until Trixie spoke again.

"The thing I like about this story of yours is that all these girls got educations and jobs, real good jobs." She swung her feet in the air. "You think this means that women get the right to vote by then?"

Sexton didn't answer. Trixie tapped her papers with her pen. "I wish I had the right to vote."

Sexton imagined Trixie in politics, possibly even running for office, with her dreadful grammar and combative ways. The thought so amused him that he could not suppress a derisive, and very audible, snort. She heard it and glared at him, ready for a fight. He tried to avoid her eye.

"You think I'm an idiot, just because I come from Brooklyn and don't speak like the damn queen," she said, going tense.

"Good heavens, no," he lied. "You're much prettier than Victoria."

She stared at him, but said nothing. Eventually she gave up, rolled over and whined, "I don't like these computer things you write about. I think I'll have them stay blown up. Seems to me that nobody in the future ever gets any exercise because they're too busy playing with these things. The whole lot of them need to get out more ... starting with Tracey and Trevor. I think I'll have them become a team of world champion ballroom dancers."

"Um-hmmm," Sexton said. "Except Tracey's the sister, not the girlfriend."

"Yeah, well, one should never go into a business venture with a lover, that's what my father used to say. That's why his trained poodles performed in front of Grand Central Station, far away from my mother. The distance gave them something to fight about when they got back together at the end of the day."

Sexton grunted. It was best not to get involved in conversations about Trixie's family. Better to change the subject, and so he did.

"Well what would you do about this Top fellow? Rather a bad egg, bent on world domination. He's heading for a fall, eh?"

Trixie's feet swung lazily back and forth as she thought. "Well, he's the richest, isn't he? So he could be redeemed, and marry Fulvia." She started scribbling like mad. "I'll need three ghosts to visit him, to show him like, the error of his ways. And then the chinchilla will say, 'God bless us everyone.'"

"Darling, it's been done. By Dickens."

"What?" Trixie let out a small scream. "Damn his eyes! Um, could it be three witches instead? Three weird sisters met on a gloomy night..."

"Shakespeare, Macbeth. Sad ending. Out, out damn spot."

Trixie looked around wildly. "Did that awful neighbor dog get in here again?"

Sexton shook his head, tears of mirth welling in his eyes.

She grinned. "See, I can make jokes."

"Yes, you certainly can. Darling, you should be a comedienne on the stage."

She groused. "Tell my agent, I'm awfully sick of trapeze work." She looked back at her sheet of paper. "Ok then ... I'll have Top visited by the three uh ... maybe like, a scarecrow and a lion and ... uh ... some kind of automaton. That's never been done before."

Sexton pushed her with his foot. "Yes, but that's silly."

She tossed her head. "I bet your friend Frank would love my idea."

"Mr. Baum writes a journal about chickens, dear. He doesn't do fiction."

Trixie made a face. "Well, it's more sensible than these airplanes you write about incessantly. I'll give you that man will fly someday, but you make it sound like there are almost twenty people on these vehicles. That's way too heavy, why the wings would have to be an acre each in size!"

Sexton could feel his face flush as he blustered, "I know it seems ridiculous, but this was the muse's doing. She dictated the story, I am just her vessel."

"I thought I was your muse!" Trixie launched herself at Sexton. Pencils and paper went flying as they grappled, then broke away laughing. They lay side by side on the bed, their chests heaving.

"Sexton?"

"Yes, Trixie?"

She rested her head on his chest. "Let's get married. I know I said 'no' before, but I think I like this writing life. It beats being in the circus; there's less elephant manure for one thing, and I'm always getting propositioned by the clowns."

"Of course, darling," he said, relieved to at last have her consent. The girl had an undeniable knack for predicting what the public wanted, and she was pretty, and probably smarter than he was. She was soft and she smelled good, but if they were to eat, he'd have to get back to work, more's the pity.

He tried to sit up. "We have to finish our chapters. Real writers stick to it, right up until the end."

"Ok. So everyone lives happily ever after. That's a good ending right?"

"Sure," Sexton said. He put his arm around her small, round shoulders. Her perfume, a heavenly blend of citrus and vanilla, made him feel intoxicated. "What about the professor?" he asked, his mind spinning.

She snuggled closer. "We'll give him some sort of prize. What's the top award in his field?"

"I don't know."

"Well just write down, 'His Field's Medal,' and we'll fix it later."

Sexton didn't-- he wanted to, but was too content to do anything at the moment. Still, he could feel energy crackling off of Trixie and knew her brain was still buzzing.

"I still have to figure out what to do about Rebecca," she said. "Is she alive, or dead or whatever?"

Sexton's head was so cloudy he had no idea. He closed his eyes, and Trixie went on.

"Well, she'll have to be alive to marry Trevor. So she's alive, no matter what. And Trevor is cured, one hundred percent. So he'll live too."

Sexton was nodding off, but managed one last question.

"What about the chinchilla?"

He could barely hear her answer, muffled as it was, in a pink cloud of love.

**--- THE END ---**

