

JEREMY BELPOIS  
CODE LYOKO



THE RETURN  
OF THE PHOENIX

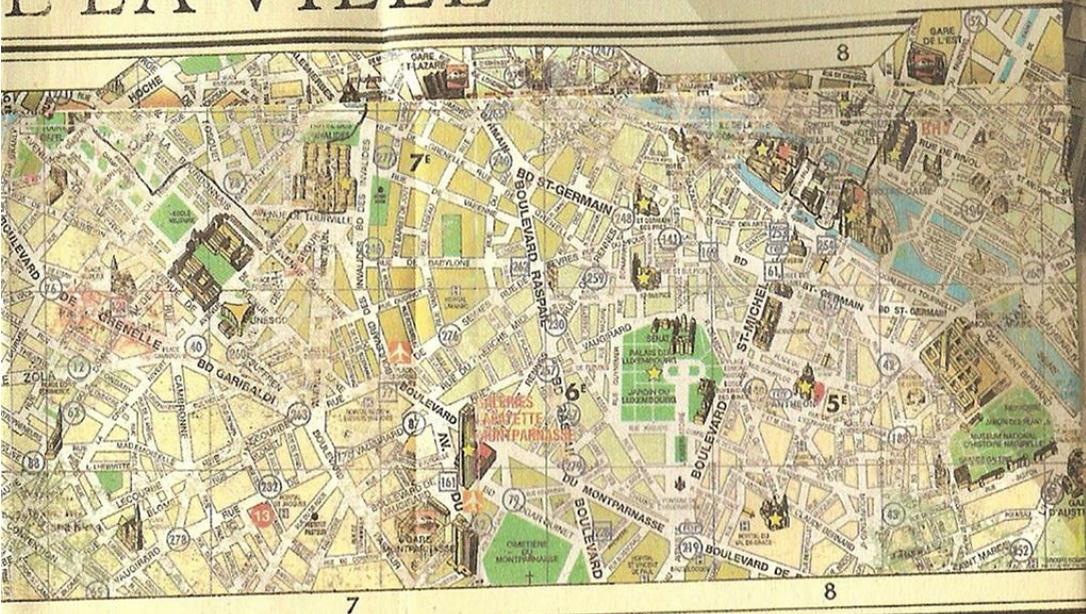
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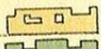




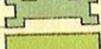
# E LA VILLE



Bâtiments.....



Bâtiments publics.....



Pares.....



Quartiers.....







**CODE LYOKO**

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Jeremy Belpois

# The Return of the Phoenix

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*Tonight it will be ten years since I first met her,  
And I've decided the time has come to tell our story.  
To reveal the incredible facts that we witnessed together;  
Yumi Ishiyama, Ulrich Stern, Odd Della Robbia,  
And myself, Jeremy Belpois. And Aelita, naturally.  
Not one day has passed when I've not thought of you Aelita.  
This story is for all of my friends,  
But it is above all else for you, Aelita.  
Goodness knows if you're still listening. . .*

*Jeremy*

# PROLOGUE

## HORSES IN THE DESERT

The dunes in the desert were shining like precious gems under the relentless heat of the sun. Sitting in one of the rows of seats of his private racetrack, Hannibal Mago lowered his elegant, white hat and observed his guests: a Russian with a large, round stomach like a barrel that had progressively pushed out his jacket and shirt so that only a white undershirt with suspenders remained, and a Chinese man with a serious expression wearing a dark tuxedo and a light coat. Hannibal Mago smiled, held out a hand covered in rings and took a bottle along with three glasses to a folding table in front of him.

The Russian asked him immediately to refill one of his water glasses that he had downed in one go.

“I don’t understand why you chose Morocco,” he exclaimed. “It’s almost twenty degrees and it’s January!”

“In my humble opinion,” murmured the Chinese man coldly “in this season, Morocco is much preferable to Russia. Furthermore, we came here to talk business. This isn’t a holiday.”

With a sigh, the Russian once again let himself fall against the back of his chair.

On the racetrack, the jockeys were riding their horses into their exit boxes. Hannibal watched them carefully. All three were purebred Arabian horses of very high calibre.

Mago’s animal was a three-year-old chestnut filly named Faiza, meaning “victory.” The Russian’s horse was a four-year-old bay horse, and the Chinese man’s was had a dark, mixed coat and was also four years old. This would be a good race.

“How about we all place a bet?” proposed the Russian. “I say that my Liev will win.”

“I bet a million dollars on Gang,” replied the Chinese man, while motioning towards his horse with his chin.

“I accept the million dollars,” concluded Mago. “In favour of Faiza, of course.”

The three criminals clenched their hands tight and turned to watch their animals, who panted and pawed at the ground nervously, ready to take off at full speed.

“Begin.”

The metal cages opened with a loud crack and the three purebreds galloped off with great speed while Mago’s servants hurried to remove the exit boxes from the track so that

they wouldn't serve as obstacles during the second of the five total turns forming the four-kilometre race.

When they passed the finish line for the first time, it was already clear that the struggle for first would only be between Faiza and Liev. Gang couldn't keep up with their pace.

"Alright, let's see what'll happen now," commented Hannibal.

After that, a woman climbed the steps of the deserted racetrack and called for his attention.

She seemed to be between forty and fifty years old, but her clear skin was still smooth and perfect like that of a young girl. Long, red hair caressed her shoulders, swaying with each of her steps and the light, warm breeze coming from the desert. She was wearing a simple chain to a golden necklace.

Hannibal smiled.

"Hello, Memory."

"Excuse me for bothering you, sir," murmured the woman. "There is an important call for you."

"It can't wait until the end of the race?"

"I'm afraid not, sir. It's agent Grigory. Very urgent."

Hannibal rose from his chair and took a break from his guests, "I'm sorry gentlemen, but my obligations won't allow me to be here to see the end of the race."

At this instant, the horses were passing in front of them to start the fourth lap. Liev was in the lead with a solid advance and Faiza was following him as close as she could, even

though she seemed to be running out of strength, while Gang was hobbling along far behind.

“With all due respect, we already know who the winner will be,” the Russian responded with a kind smile.

Hannibal smiled also, although it was a smile that was totally different.

In a livid manner, he drew an enormous pistol hidden under his jacket and fired two shots one after the other. Liev whinnied and lost speed, losing his footing while the jockey spurred him on in vain without understanding what had happened. On one of the horse’s hips, a clump of red hair soaked with blood could be seen. Behind him, Gang stopped too and looked, confused, toward the seating area.

During this time, Faiza had caught up in the race. When the fifth lap began, her two adversaries were faltering, uncertain of their steps. Now, Liev and Gang fell on the track, throwing off their jockeys, who rolled into the sand.

“You killed them!” cried the Russian while jumping to his feet.

“I only put them to sleep,” corrected Mago. “The dose was maybe a bit excessive...but when they wake up, they will be better than ever.”

He took Memory by the arm, “It seems to me that I’ve won our little bet, gentlemen. Now, you owe me two million dollars.”

“It’s never bad to give a helping hand,” he added with a teasing pout while leaving with the woman.

Hannibal followed Memory inside the enormous manor that stood just behind the racetrack, and he stopped in front of a room closed by a large wooden door. The doorknob, made of pure gold, featured the engraving of a bird with two emeralds in place of eyes: a green phoenix, the symbol of the Green Phoenix.

Memory stepped to the side to let Mago pass and he entered alone. He went up to the desk in the centre of the room on which there was a large, extra thin monitor. The sharp face of his agent, Grigory Nictapolus, filled the screen. Hannibal Mago brushed over a button he had under the table to activate a program to mask his voice.

“I hope for your own well-being that this is really urgent.”

He crossed his arms in front of his face, causing most of the rings he was wearing to clink against each other.

“Yes, sir, it is,” answered Grigory. “The kids brought one of their friends to the place where the supercomputer is located.”

Hannibal leaned towards the screen. Grigory had his attention from then on.

“And so?”

“Unfortunately, I hadn’t put the park at Kadic under surveillance, which is why I needed to do some research, but ultimately, I was able to discover what we would need: Lyoko’s supercomputer is located in the underground of an abandoned factory on a small island in the centre of the river.

The factory is connected to Kadic by a secret passage through the sewers.”

Grigory smiled.

“On the iron manhole to access the passage,” he continued “and on the walls of the factory, there is the symbol of the Phoenix.”

Hannibal slammed the desk with his fist and his rings gleamed for an instant.

“I didn’t have the slightest doubt!” he thundered. “That traitor Walter built it with our money! But tell me, this super-computer, is it activated?”

“No, sir. Do you want me to activate it?”

Hannibal rose from his seat and shook his head.

“Don’t even think about it. Instead, prepare me a warm welcome, Grigory. I’m leaving immediately.”

Hannibal shut off the computer with an impatient motion of his hand. He should send away his guests, and quick. From now on, he had much more important things to deal with.

# 1

## X.A.N.A.'S FEAR



The last few days' rain had dissolved the snow, and the tree-lined paths were covered in mud as sticky as glue. The dark grey sky called for yet more rain.

The Kadic park surrounded the three kids, stretching to the imposing rock wall and the iron fence crowned by the symbol of the establishment. To its right stood the school buildings: the student residences, the administration offices, the science laboratories, the classrooms, the cafeteria and the gymnasium. They were positioned like the prongs of an enormous fork between which the three quadrangles were situated.

Aelita Hopper was walking in silence beside her friends, Jeremy Belpois and Eva Skinner. Together, they made a very odd group. Aelita, small and with fiery red hair in a pixie cut,

was wearing a heavy winter jacket with feathers of the same lively red colour. Eva, however, was taller and more strikingly beautiful. She had short, blonde hair, eyes clear as crystals and perfect lips. Then, there was Jeremy, with his typical large cardigan and usual round, geeky glasses sitting slightly off-kilter on his nose.

“Brr,” the young boy trembled. “I should’ve worn a warmer jacket.”

“I’m not cold,” remarked Eva.

“Me neither,” confirmed Aelita without paying too much attention. She was thinking that her father must have also been to this place before leaving with her to the virtual world. After that, Aelita remained trapped in Lyoko for ten long years, but without growing older by even a single day. She was supposed to be twenty-three years old, however, she was only thirteen now. The more that she thought about it, the more that it seemed like a crazy story to her. Her father, on the other hand...

Jeremy was observing her fixedly, eyes full of concern.

“Do you have something to tell me, Aelita?” he asked her.

The young girl nodded. What she might discover ahead scared her, but she felt that it was time to clear things up.

“A day has already passed since I found the second secret room in the Hermitage and the replica,” she recalled. “And up until now, I could only explore the first level of my father’s journal.”

Jeremy nodded in silence, pensively.

“Alright, shouldn’t we start our exploration now?” the young girl concluded.

Aelita had entered the journal the other day, and like a ghost, she could observe with her own eyes several fragments of the history of her father and her mother, Anthea. And now, when she felt close to finding answers, Jeremy seemed to be backing out for a reason that she didn’t understand.

“We shouldn’t yet,” replied the schoolboy. “First, we need to be sure that...”

“This is about MY FATHER, Jeremy!” the young girl exploded. “And he is DEAD!! And I don’t have any idea where my mother is!”

“Ok, ok,” surrendered Jeremy, protecting himself with his hands. “You’re right,” he continued immediately, while smiling at her tenderly. “Just let me complete the final verifications. Tonight, we’ll meet in my room with all the others. And I promise you that after that, we’ll enter the second level of the replica and we’ll discover what’s in the final part of your father’s journal. It’s just that it isn’t so simple. You need to be a little patient...”

His friend tried to argue with him, but Jeremy started to head down the path to return to the dorms, hands in his pockets and his neck embedded in his shoulders to protect himself from the cold. Aelita sighed. Jeremy was her best friend, and maybe even more than that, but he could be really stubborn.

“How about continuing your walk with me?” she then asked Eva.

“Sure thing.”

Eva Skinner seemed like a young girl like a lot of others, who, at the time, instead of studying, was spending her afternoon with a friend in the school’s park.

Behind this angelic face though hid a secret that her friends didn’t even suspect existed. It was a dangerous secret that lay nested in her for some time now and that obligated her to act and speak in the name of someone else. Or rather, something else. X.A.N.A. had indeed possessed the young girl, bending her to his will. But at this exact moment, the artificial intelligence inside of her was yelling.

Why had she accepted this walk with Aelita? And why hadn’t she already attacked her, also giving her the dark kiss that would allow X.A.N.A. to take over her body? With Odd Della Robbia, that would have been very simple...

The truth was that X.A.N.A. didn’t want to do it. Not to Aelita. And this reluctance, which wasn’t absolutely rational, made him furious. But the rage also wasn’t in the nature of an artificial intelligence. X.A.N.A. didn’t have feelings. He wasn’t programmed to have them. So, in this case, why did he feel this strange warmth when Aelita had asked Eva, and him in extension, that they should continue to walk together?

*Stop, spoke X.A.N.A.  $56,780 \times 75,678 = 4,296,996,840$ .*

Good. At least his ability to calculate was functioning correctly.

*Six times two equals twelve.*

X.A.N.A. reflected on it for a fraction of a second as if paralysed.

*Six times two equals twelve*, he repeated again.

The result was correct, of course, but the problem was elsewhere: he didn't calculate it through multiplication, he based it on memory. And not his memory, but on the memories of Eva Skinner.

What could that mean? What was happening to him?

When he had possessed the spirit and body of Eva, X.A.N.A. wasn't much more than a digital fragment desperately navigating in the unrestrained sea of the Internet searching for fragments that he lacked, dispersed in the ether. Hopper and the children had dealt him a hard blow, and even though they didn't completely eliminate him, they had managed to destroy his core.

But then what? What exactly would happen to him next? Maybe it was that he hadn't taken possession of Eva, who was also prevailing over him.

And that, that was a problem.

"Is everything alright?" Aelita asked him.

X.A.N.A. looked, surprised, at the young redhead who was walking by his side. He had definitely been distracted and distant for too long and she had taken notice.

"Yes, yes..." Eva scrambled to say. "I was thinking about what Jeremy said."

“Yes, me too. It makes me angry,” sighed Aelita, taking her friend’s hand in her own.

X.A.N.A. realised that Eva’s fingers were covered in sweat and jumped. Disgusting human emotions! He’d had trouble controlling them for some time now. He hadn’t the slightest idea why.

All he could do was stay on his guard and find a way to enter the replica in the Hermitage with these stupid kids. If that worked out well, he could return to Lyoko. And then, things would really change. He would no longer be a ridiculous cross between a human and a computer, he would rid himself of this insignificant girl and he would be X.A.N.A. once more, and only X.A.N.A., indisputable lord of the virtual world and the future master of the real world.

At more or less six in the afternoon, the Kadic library was empty. There was only Ulrich and Yumi left inside, sat one facing the other with their heads buried in their books.

Yumi was concentrating on her studies. She was one year older than her friends, so she was in a higher-level class than them, and the day after she would have a more complicated history exam. As for Ulrich...well, he didn’t have any exam on the horizon, but he couldn’t miss out on the chance to spend some time alone with her.

Yumi lived with her parents not too far from the establishment, and during the afternoon, she didn’t usually stay at

Kadic. He absolutely had to take advantage of this opportunity.

Ulrich raised his head from the books and looked at her. Yumi was tall and thin, and had long, black hair and two almond eyes that seemed full of intriguing things. She was dressed in black, like usual, and her brow was furrowed. She was gorgeous.

“Hey! What are you staring at me so much for?” she asked suddenly.

“Nothing, nothing,” jumped Ulrich, starting to splutter. “I was thinking...well, I was thinking about Odd. Don't you think he's acting a bit too strange lately?”

Yumi set aside the history book for a moment.

“It's everything that's happening to him, he's in love,” she declared. “It seems like he and Eva are serious.” Ulrich still wasn't totally convinced and he shook his head. It wasn't just that he was acting passionately for the beautiful North American girl who had been in their class for several weeks now...

“What's going on?” Yumi pressed. “You should be happy for your best friend to finally stop acting like Don Juan with the first girl that passes by and for managing to find a girlfriend.”

“But do you realise how they look at each other?” insisted Ulrich. “It always looks like they're sharing some sort of mysterious secret. And sometimes, Eva starts a sentence and Odd finishes it as if they were thinking the exact same thing.”

“Well, that would be because they’re made for each other.”

Ulrich sighed. He and Yumi were also made for each other. He didn’t have the slightest doubt. Though he never could understand what she really wanted. However, despite the fact that he had known her for a long time, this young girl was indecipherable to him.

“Hey, guys!” a voice called to them from the back of the library.

And Odd was there with his usual lively smile and clothes. His hair, a bright blond colour, was shaped rigidly to a peak on his head as if he had been in a dynamite explosion.

“Speak of the devil...” mumbled Ulrich, resting against the back of his chair.

“What are we saying about what devil?” asked Odd with curiosity, while sitting down straddling a chair and beginning to carefully observe a book that Yumi had. Strange: history had never been his favourite subject... Although, to be honest, he didn’t particularly have one.

“Have you heard the news?” he exclaimed right away. “Jeremy wants all of us to meet up together in his room tonight. To your stations!”

“Seriously?” sighed Ulrich. “Well, he never told me anything.”

“Me neither,” said Odd while giving him a slap on the shoulder. “But he told Eva and Aelita.”

Ulrich threw a look towards Yumi, but the young girl was already turned towards Odd.

“Well, I think it’s a really good idea. Things keep getting more and more complicated...”

“Yeah!” exclaimed Odd while getting to his feet again as if in a rush.

“Are you going to tell us where you’re rushing off to like that?” Ulrich asked.

“Some question! I’m going to see Eva, of course.”

Ulrich rolled his eyes, while Yumi tried to hold back a small giggle.

Jeremy’s room in the student dormitories was one of the rare single rooms reserved for male students. It was a bedroom adorned with a poster of Einstein hanging above the head of the bed and his pyjamas were nicely stacked under the pillow. However, the desk, unlike the rest of the room, was the definition of chaos and disorder, and seemed on the point of breaking under the weight of several keyboards, screens and other more varied computer hardware.

Jeremy finished writing something and turned back to his friends. He looked at them one by one: Aelita, obviously, Ulrich and Yumi, and next, Odd and Eva. Richard Dupuis, the young man who was ten years older and who had been a classmate of Aelita’s at Kadic in the past, was also present. Except that Aelita, trapped on Lyoko, hadn’t continued to grow, and Richard, on the other hand, had, which is why he

was more than twenty years old. He was the only adult amongst them, even though he was looking around with the same lost air of a little boy.

“Alright, boss,” commenced Ulrich “ready to start the party?”

Jeremy opened the closet that took up a wall of the room, and took from it a poster that he had made during the afternoon. He asked Aelita to help him stick it to the wall with scotch tape.

“Mmm...that seems rather complex,” commented Richard.

Jeremy looked at him with his head askew. In reality, the poster was rather simple: he had written down four key points and connected them to each other with a sequential algorithm. It was so much of a struggle to make it clear!

“Ok then, I'll get to explaining it,” the kid rushed to exclaim when he noticed the perplexed look on Ulrich's face.

“Excellent idea,” smiled Yumi.

On the poster, several words could be read:

- 1) *Dossier*
- 2) *First City*
- 3) *Mirror*
- 4) *Richard Dupuis*

Jeremy grabbed a marker and highlighted the first number on the paper.

“I tried to organise everything a bit that we found up until now. I am convinced that we are facing a series of tracks left

by Franz Hopper, and now, we should assemble them like the pieces of a puzzle. In first place, Professor Hertz's dossier that contained a series of the Hoppix code. The programming language with which Professor Hopper built Lyoko is very difficult, so much so that I still haven't managed to understand what these codes are for. Anyway, in the dossier, there was also an address that we followed..." Jeremy stopped, marker in the air, searching for the second number. "Number two: a replica that contained a rough copy of the virtual world that I've called First City."

"What a great waste of imagination, bravo dear sir!" commented Ulrich, provoking laughter. Jeremy, however, remained more serious.

"In reality," he continued "it's the name that Hopper was using too, in his journal. Whatever the case, Ulrich and Yumi entered the First City by using the scanner they found in Brussels to virtualise themselves, but they didn't manage to discover anything..."

"The men in black appeared!" protested Yumi. "They were chasing us down!"

Jeremy raised his hand to call for silence.

"If you continue to interrupt me, we'll never finish. Let's leave the commentary for later, ok?" Everyone agreed, and Jeremy continued his discourse, which he had prepared nicely. "Alright, so, let's see the numbers. One, the dossier. Two, the First City. Next comes number three, in other words, the replica that Aelita found in the Hermitage. Seeing as it's a

journal that reflected upon several moments in the life of Professor Hopper, I have called it the Mirror. Everyone agree?”

His friends didn't even flinch.

“Ok, everyone's in agreement then. So finally, we arrive at number four: the codes that appear on Richard's palm-computer. Each screen of data starts with the word *AELITA*, but the rest is code written in Hoppix. We don't know what they do... Heck, to tell the truth, I don't even know if they're a complete program or only a fragment of some more complex piece of software. But I'm willing to bet that whatever it is, that the code has something to do with Lyoko.”

Jeremy stopped to catch his breath, and traced the marker next over a line that went from point two to three, from the First City to the Mirror.

“When Aelita showed me the second secret room of the Hermitage,” he explained “I suspected something right away. And this is the reason that I prevented her from entering the second level of the journal yesterday: I wanted to confirm my idea. To give it to you briefly, below the Hermitage, there's a scanner that provides access to the Mirror, but there's no supercomputer.”

Aelita jumped up.

“What are you saying?” she protested. “The journal is a virtual reality generated by a computer, so there must be a computer!”

“Exactly,” confirmed Jeremy calmly “but this computer isn't at the Hermitage: all that's there is a simple terminal.

And this isn't all. Based on the descriptions by Yumi and Ulrich, I don't believe there was a supercomputer at Brussels either. In short, guys, we're speaking of a machine that's much more complicated...and much larger. It occupies the whole floor of the factory! It's impossible to just hide one here and there."

"And so?" insisted Aelita.

"Well, that's the big discovery: the First City and the Mirror are only sandboxes! Sometimes, programmers introduce a sort of operational core to computers completely separate from the rest. It's a protected space where any such experiments cannot damage the rest of the system. Precisely like a sandbox that children play in at the park. In English, it's like constructing a computer first, and then adding another smaller one..."

The others exchanged confused looks. They maybe didn't understand all the details, but the main concept was clear to them. The sandbox theory explained a lot of things that had remained in the dark the whole time before.

"Hopper made precisely that," Jeremy continued. "Inside the supercomputer in the factory, he created two sandboxes: the First City and the Mirror. The scanners at the Hermitage and the primitive materials at Brussels do nothing more than connect to the supercomputer at the factory thanks to a high-security wireless network which then accesses these two cores..."

“Stop, stop,” sighed Ulrich. “You’re starting to give me a headache...”

“I get it,” murmured Odd, on the other hand.

The others stared at him, surprised. In general, the young boy was a genuine idiot when it came to technology.

“Alright, let him finish!” Eva then exclaimed.

“Yes, of course. Well...” Jeremy struggled to continue. “We would have shut down the supercomputer totally convinced that we had deactivated it forever. But in reality, we didn’t realise that there was a hidden protection system that continued to supply energy to two sectors of the computer. These would be the two cores of the First City and the Mirror. And, in my opinion, the sandboxes weren’t there by coincidence: they were tracks purposefully left by Hopper.”

“To tell us...what?” asked Yumi.

“I don’t have the slightest clue. But tomorrow afternoon, after class, we can discover what’s on the second level of the Mirror. What do you all say?”

The others smiled and Jeremy relaxed.

# 2

## SECRET AGENT W.



The limousine drove at full speed down the streets of Washington. The street lamps reflected off the body of the car, leaving brief, brilliant yellow shadows.

Inside the vehicle, Dido was looking out the windows at the calm shores of the Potomac river, separated from the roadway by a long group of trees. To see all this water that was passing through the middle of the city, opening a path between buildings, roads and parks, managed to give her a sensation of serenity.

The woman pressed on the button that lowered the window separating her from the driver.

“Mark,” she said to him as soon as the divider opened up enough to let her clearly speak through, “drive more slowly, please.”

“We’ll be late, ma’am.”

Dido checked her watch: thirty minutes past midnight. Mark was right that they'd arrive late to the meeting. But this wasn't important.

She closed the divider isolating the back of the limousine again and fell back against the seat. In France, it was half past six in the morning. It was time to make her call.

She grabbed the satellite telephone attached to the armrest of her seat, pressed the button to activate the anti-listening device, and entered the number.

The phone rang and rang for a good while.

"Hello...?" a groggy voice finally responded.

"This is Dido."

Silence.

"Yes...?" the voice answered slowly then, suddenly more awake. "Ma'am?"

"I have instructions for you. A car is coming to collect you shortly. Be ready."

"What? But I... I can't right now!"

"A trusted source," Dido continued, ignoring the response, "revealed to us that Hannibal Mago is headed that way. It surely has something to do with Hopper. I want you to be at the airport when Mago arrives so that from that moment on, you won't lose sight of him."

On the other side of the line, agitated noises could be heard, sheets rustling and bare feet running on the floor.

"I can't do it, ma'am," a murmur spoke into Dido's ear. "I'm no longer qualified. I don't remember anything!"

“You know everything you need to. You know that you’ve done very bad things, and you don’t want your wife or your son to know. For this reason, Walter, you’re going to do what I say. Ten years ago, you became a key player in this story, and now, it’s you who’ll finish it. The men who are on their way to get you are agents of mine. They will tell you how to get in contact with me.”

Dido hung up the telephone without warning, waited a second, then dialled a new number. This time, the person answered immediately.

“Agent Lone Wolf at your orders.”

“Go look for Walter. I have a mission for you.”

Ulrich entered class and sat by himself at one of the desks in the last row. He looked at Jeremy and Aelita for a moment, sitting together, then at Odd beside Eva. It wasn’t fair. He and Odd had always been like two peas in a pod: the same desk, the same dorm. It’s true that sometimes Odd was unbearable, and that’s not to mention Kiwi, the bratty, little mutt that he called a dog that also lived in their room.

But they had become friends. And now, he had been replaced by a girl!

“Hello everyone,” said Professor Hertz while entering through the door, dressed in her usual lab coat. She was a petite woman with a cloud of cotton-like grey hair on her head and round glasses. She was carrying a test tube full to the brim with strange black and white alternating discs.

“A Volta battery!” Jeremy immediately exclaimed from his spot in the front.

The professor smiled.

“That’s right. Today, we’re going to study Volta’s battery, the first static electricity energy generator...”

Ulrich’s attention immediately drifted elsewhere. It was much more interesting to think about what Jeremy had talked about the night before. They were going to spend the afternoon at the Hermitage, the cottage where Aelita had lived with her father several years before, and then they finally were going to use the scanner to do some exploration. Even though it wouldn’t really be him entering the Mirror.

After a long dispute, they decided what the team would be: Aelita, of course, with Yumi and Odd. Ulrich tried to protest, but Odd was adamant, so he eventually gave in, which was too bad, because Ulrich would have loved to enter the virtual worlds created by Hopper. Inside, he would no longer be a simple Kadic boy, and he would transform into a samurai, with a katana at his side, ready to face any danger. And he formed an invincible duo with Yumi.

His phone started to vibrate in the pocket of his pants. Ulrich took it out and read *Mum* on the screen.

That bothered him a little. Ulrich did not get along well with his parents. What could his mother want at such a time? Then he felt faint: the week before, a mysterious man with two dogs had tried to hurt Odd’s father and Yumi’s parents. Maybe...

“Can I leave for a second, Professor?” he asked while raising a hand at his desk. “I have to go to the bathroom!”

His words were met with crazy laughter from the class.

“Hurry up,” was Professor Hertz’s response.

Ulrich smiled while running from class, and as soon as he had shut the door behind him, he answered the phone.

“Mum, did something happen?”

“Huh? Hi, Ulrich. Sorry to bother you... No, nothing happened...”

Ulrich sighed. He was starting to get annoyed.

“What is it then? Why’d you call me?” he argued. “You know I have class now. You had me worried!”

His mother continued to stammer as if she was trying to say something, but didn’t know where to start.

“You see...” she started finally. “Your father should arrive in the city more or less in time to eat. He had an urgent business affair or something of the type. I don’t fully understand. But seeing as he’ll be in town, you could call him. You could see each other and talk for a bit...”

Ulrich’s parents lived very far from the city of Kadic and normally, they never came to see him. The young boy sighed. This afternoon, he wanted to go to the Hermitage with the others. He didn’t have time to be with his father. Furthermore, they would just end up arguing like usual anyway.

“I don’t know if I’ll be able to,” he lied, grateful that his mother couldn’t see his face through the phone. “I have too much to study.”

“Ulrich,” the woman’s voice became quieter and softer. “I know that things didn’t go so well the last time, but you should give your father a chance. Promise me that you’ll call him.”

Ulrich dismissed his mother as quick as he could. He then thought for a moment and dialled his father’s number. An electronic voice told him that the phone he dialled was off or out of service at that moment.

The sky during the first hour of the afternoon was still grey, but it was a bit warmer, and there was no rain.

Ulrich put the phone back in his pocket (as usual, he had no way to contact his father), and he watched Odd carefully.

“You seem really happy. You’re staring into space with a smile stuck on your face like an idiot. And how the heck did Jim agree to lift your punishment?”

Ulrich gave a slight sarcastic smile. Several days earlier, the gym teacher, Jim Morales, had been on the verge of finding out all about Kiwi, and had decided to restrict Odd from leaving the dorms.

“Who were you calling?” his friend asked, pointing towards Ulrich’s phone that he had just put away.

“My father. But he didn’t respond,” the young man shrugged his shoulders. “Well, parents only lead to trouble. You know what I mean, right? How is your old man? Is he better yet?”

Odd staggered as if trying to recover some information from some lost nook in his brain.

“He’s doing better,” he then said in a monotone voice. “He’s eating again. But his memory still isn’t back.”

“He’s going through the same thing as Yumi’s parents,” said Ulrich, nodding his head. “They are disoriented, and they keep repeating the same phrases.”

“Yeah,” Odd confirmed. “Dad keeps speaking of a certain Walter. He says that he sent him, and he keeps mumbling about some absurd story.”

“Walter?” said Ulrich, surprised. “That’s my dad’s name too.”

At that moment, Odd signalled across the street. Richard Dupuis was headed towards the Hermitage with his hands in his pockets, dragging his feet.

“Hey, Richard!” Ulrich called out to him. “Let’s go together.”

“You should make a code name,” said the guy seated by his side.

“It’s true,” confirmed the one in the opposite seat. “Like us. I’m Weasel, he’s Ferret, and our boss is Lone Wolf.”

“I’m Walter,” he answered, shrugging. “Period.”

Just like Dido had told him, these men had come to get him by car. They had even brought him some new clothes: a black suit, a black tie and a black coat that went down to his feet. And a pair of sunglasses. Black, of course. It was ridicu-

lous being dressed like this. They could be noticed a kilometre away. But he remained silent and changed his clothes. However, he wouldn't accept being given some stupid nickname like Lynx or Prairie Dog. The gun weighed down heavily on him, and the holster for the pistol made his armpit itch.

*How'd I manage to get myself in this mess?* he thought.

The truth was that he didn't remember. His memory was an empty, black hole. He remembered what happened since 1994 up until now...but absolutely nothing that he had done prior. All he knew was that he had done some deplorable things, and that these men in black and Professor Hopper had something to do with it.

Lone Wolf, the boss of this little group, drove the sedan to the Parisian region and immediately headed to the airport. Once there, he traded several words with some police officers, showing some notebooks and authorisations, and next they were opening the gate so that they could enter the zone reserved for planes.

They were parked behind a hangar, posted there, binoculars in hand and guns loaded. Around one in the morning, Weasel and Ferret went off to buy sandwiches. Walter's had weighed down his stomach like a brick.

"How long are we supposed to stay here waiting?" he asked.

"Silence," said Lone Wolf, lowering his eyebrows from behind his black glasses. They continued to wait.

The sedan radio was actually a frequency scanner, a device to listen for radio transmissions from the police and the control tower at the airport. Through the opened doors of the car, the operators talking to pilots ready to land could be heard speaking short phrases through static.

A message then caught their attention.

“Tower here to *Phoenix-1*. You are cleared to land.”

“*Phoenix-1* here. Received, tower. Preparing to land.”

The name “Phoenix” made Walter tremble.

All four of them climbed into a luggage car that an employee had forgotten in front of the hangar door, and Lone Wolf took the wheel. The sector F runways were meant for private planes, the jets belonging to the rich and such. A long row of planes gave them some cover before arriving at the wide promenade of tarmac and scorched grass, interrupted by lines of yellow paint and luminous projectors that lit their path towards the planes.

The men in black were hiding in the last hangar in the line. Walter took the binoculars and leaned towards the exit to get a look. A red, beat-up pickup truck that was entering the runway caught his attention. Driving it, there was a thin-faced man and on the seat behind him, he had two dogs so big that they reminded him of horses.

“Grigory Nictapolus,” murmured Weasel.

“Dido wath right. Thing *th* are getting *theriouth*,” commented Ferret.

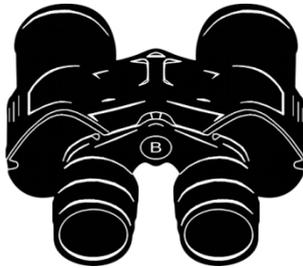
Walter pointed his binoculars up towards the sky. He was waiting to see if *Phoenix-1* would be an elegant private jet or a luxurious helicopter, but he was completely wrong. What was about to land on this runway was an enormous military plane with camouflage paint.

“Look,” he murmured.

“A C-17 Globemaster,” said Lone Wolf, raising his head. “This nasty thing can carry up to one hundred or so passengers and seventy-seven tons of cargo. Mago brought his whole army.”

# 3

## ACCESSING THE MIRROR



The Hermitage was a three-storey building, tall and narrow with a small porch in front of the main entry and a small garage to the left. Around it, the house had a fenced garden. The fence at the back separated it from the much larger Kadic Academy park.

Ulrich, Odd and Richard arrived at the front gate together. The other children were already there, waiting for them seated on a swing that also served as a settee. They had all come: Jeremy, Aelita, Eva and Yumi, holding Kiwi in her arms.

Odd saw his dog, though he gave no sign of recognising him, and the little puppy growled at him, suspicious. But this only lasted an instant. The teen ran towards him, and Kiwi

began to bark, overly excited, licking his face like he did with everyone.

Kiwi was still injured and his body was covered in bandages. According to Jeremy, two large dogs had attacked him. The same ones who always accompanied the man with the red pickup, who had attacked Odd's father and Yumi's parents.

Ulrich approached Yumi and put his arm around her shoulders.

"It was nice of you to bring him."

"Actually," she responded, blushing, "I had to do it. Hiroki went out with our mum today, and Kiwi wouldn't stop complaining."

"Well, other than that, you gave Odd a nice surprise."

"What do you say," exclaimed Jeremy, who until now had been talking to Aelita some distance away from the group, "we cut the chit-chat and get to work. We have a whole virtual world to explore!"

During this time, Richard hadn't stopped looking around him for one instant, distracted like a child with sweets in sight but who is afraid of getting in trouble with mother and father. Ulrich almost found this touching: he was ten years older than them, much taller and with completely uncombed red hair, but he seemed so shy...

"Is everything ok?" he asked him.

Richard nodded but then shook his head.

“I think one of us should stay here, in the garden, to keep watch, in case someone comes.”

“But who would come here?!” Jeremy mocked.

“Well I think it’s a good idea,” Aelita replied, approaching Richard and placing a hand on his shoulder. “The man with dogs could still be hanging around, and I would feel a lot safer knowing someone was out here keeping their eyes peeled.”

Richard Dupuis’s face brightened with an ample smile.

Lone Wolf had been right: Hannibal Mago had brought an entire army with him.

Walter and his companions remained in their position, watching the long lines of men and vehicles disembark from the plane: soldiers in camouflage uniform with semi-automatic pistols, faces hidden by helmets and gasmasks, and five trucks, two open ones transporting troops and three carrying crates and equipment.

“This is crazy,” said Walter. “How are they going to move around the city with all these weapons and camouflage-paint vehicles? It’s as if they want to invade France!”

“He managed to land a military plane at a public airport,” breathed Lone Wolf. “Do you realise how much that must have cost him? This guy has enough money to go wherever he wants.”

“And here’s Mago in person,” Weasel announced.

Walter held the binoculars back up again. At that moment a white, open-roofed Jeep descended from the plane, driven by a woman around forty years old with striking red hair. At her side was a man of unidentifiable age with his face partially hidden by a wide-brimmed purple hat. He was dressed in a suit and tie, both purple, and on his hands, resting on the dashboard, shone dozens of rings.

“He’s like a gangster with a fancy tailor.” Walter commented.

“Did you hear that, *both*?” Ferret said after bursting out laughing. “A *fant**hy* gang*t**hter*!”

Grigory Nictapolus’s pickup approached the Jeep and the man stepped out, closely followed by two Rottweilers with pitch black coats. He and Mago exchanged brief nods.

“Get back to the car,” hissed Lone Wolf. “They’re about to head out.”

The group moved like a rigid snake around the perimeter of the airport and after several seconds the men in black’s sedan appeared behind them.

Walter sat in front with Lone Wolf and nervously fiddled with his seatbelt. He carried a gun underneath his jacket. And there was an army moving in front of them. He wasn’t suited to this kind of thing!

Mago’s soldiers had hidden their weapons under a fake bottom in the trucks and they were now looking around, joking with one another, hissing and gesturing at the pretty girls they saw on the roads.

Walter had never seen such frightened grimaces in his life.

“Where are they going?” he asked.

“I haven’t the slightest idea,” Lone Wolf responded. “The only one who knew anything about any of this was you...and you lost your memory ten years ago.”

“Maybe they’re heading for the Hermitage,” Walter murmured.

This name provoked anxiety within him. He remembered the somewhat gloomy chalet. He had been there many times, but when? And why?

Mago’s Jeep, at the head of the strange fleet of vehicles, drove onto a narrow street between two rows of buildings and stopped at the end of it, where there was a high wall made of bricks.

On Mago’s order, ten men armed with pickaxes got out of the first truck and began to work away at the wall.

“I know this place!” Walter cried suddenly. “Kadic Academy is near here...and the Hermitage...and...”

“Do you know what’s on the other side of this wall?”

Walter nodded as his head turned. It was as if he had been this same way a million times during his life, but everything was enveloped in a dense, white cloud, like cream.

“There’s a road,” he stammered. “It has been closed off for a long time. And beyond the road there’s a fence. And then a bridge. And a factory on an island right in the middle of the river.”

Lone Wolf scratched his head, pensive.

“A hidden abandoned factory...and Kadic Academy right beside it. It’s like a full circle. And I’m sure that we’ll find Hopper right in the middle of all this.”

“The school, the factory and the house form a sort of triangle!” Walter burst out, shifting in his seat. “And I get the feeling that there’s something important in the Hermitage.”

The boss of the men in black smiled.

“Dido was sure that you could help us. Now, I’ll tell you what we’re going to do: my men and I will get out here and watch Mago, while you take the car and go to the Hermitage, to secure the perimeter. And that means cutting the electricity and telephone wires and checking that there’s no-one in the house. If there are intruders, neutralise them. And then, call me. If I don’t respond, get in contact with Dido straight away and tell her that we have a problem. Understood?”

Walter felt a bead of sweat slide down his forehead and stop, suspended on the tip of his nose.

“Understood,” he whispered.

The Hermitage’s semi-basement covered the entire floor space of the house and the garage.

Higher up on the walls was a row of windows, low but large, through which little light filtered due to the dust covering the glass. At the end of the main hallway was a closed door that led to the underground passage allowing access to

the sewers, and from there, Kadic and the supercomputer factory.

Jeremy led the group through piles of more or less damp old junk to the cold room, an ample cement room closed by a thick, large, metallic door. Thanks to a series of open holes in these walls, the room could be refrigerated to store meat, vegetables and other perishable foods. But this was not the most important thing about this room, and the children had taken a long time to discover what was.

“Come on,” Jeremy exclaimed. “Let’s open the door.”

Ulrich and Yumi immediately set to work. First, the boy hoisted himself onto a row of hooks for hanging ham on and pulled it down. The girl went to another hook, and pushed it up. Meanwhile, Jeremy closed, opened, and closed the door of the room.

The expectant silence that followed was suddenly interrupted by a metallic sound and a grinding noise. After this part of the wall was raised, revealing a small door.

“Me first!” cried Odd, raising a hand to the sky.

Richard Dupuis wrapped his coat tightly around himself and sat beneath a tree. He realised too late that the ground was soft and muddy and the back of his pants became covered in mud. He huffed as he sat comfortably. At least he couldn’t get himself any dirtier...

*You should have gone inside with the others,* he told himself.

That much was true, but he hadn't had the courage.

The teens didn't understand it. They were too young and energetic for it, but him...all that surpassed him, quite simply.

Richard was twenty-three years old, he went to university and it wasn't long before he would receive his diploma in engineering. His life was peaceful and planned out, with equations to solve and projects to complete. And then, everything had changed: his palm-computer had begun to fill itself with unknown codes and he had needed to return to his old city, to his old school. He had found one of his old best friends, where he had lived ten years earlier, and he had realised that Aelita seemed to be thirteen years old. He had discovered the existence of a virtual world into which people could really enter, and where artificial monsters had decided to take over the world. And after that, there were the men with Rottweilers. And the secret government agents. And many more things.

A whole crazy story.

And now, he had to go into the basement of a ruined house to see his ex-best friend dematerialised into a science-fiction supercomputer? No thanks. Now all he had left to do was go mad.

Richard took his palm-computer out of his pocket and began to revise the various pages of codes for the umpteenth time. Jeremy said that they were in a programming language invented by Professor Hopper. Richard decided that the boy

was right: it was a “machine language” and a very complicated one to decode, but...

The sound of tyres made him jump. He leapt to his feet and instinctively hid behind the trunk of a tree.

The dark sedan had traversed the roads at full speed to then slow down in front of the Hermitage, leaving two dark tracks on the bitumen.

A man around fifty years old with very short hair got out. He was dressed in a black suit and tie and black sunglasses and wore a preoccupied expression on his face.

Richard saw him approach the gate and muse about something. The young man tried to beat him inside: he ran towards the garage, still staying behind the trees so as not to be seen.

He had to raise the alarm, immediately.

Jeremy opened the door of the scanner column, allowing everyone to see a narrow, circular space that was completely empty. Odd had disappeared.

The boy sat in front of the terminal again.

“A perfect transfer!” he announced. “Odd is in the virtual world of the Mirror.”

He heard the rest of the teens pile up behind him to take a look.

The computer screen showed Odd’s face, although it was very different now: he had symmetrical mauve-coloured stripes on his cheeks and forehead, and two cat ears sticking

out from his hair. He had taken the appearance of the catboy he always looked like on Lyoko.

“Can you hear me?” Jeremy asked him, taking the terminal microphone.

“Loud and clear,” his friend’s voice crackled through the speakers. “But...Aelita told me that I’d find myself in a sort of plaza with three trees, but I don’t see anything like that here. I’m on a road in a city...”

Jeremy nodded.

“The three trees were a simple menu to access the different levels in the Mirror, so I bypassed them and sent you directly to your destination. You’ll need to explore the area a bit to understand how this level of the journal works.”

“Got it,” Odd smiled. “Send Aelita and Yumi, and we’ll get to it!”

Jeremy leaned back from the computer keyboard and ran a hand through his hair.

“Yumi, it’s your turn. Enter the column. You’re number two.”

The girl squeezed Ulrich’s hand gently in a silent goodbye.

“Let’s go,” she then smiled. “I don’t want to leave Odd alone for too long. Who knows what kind of trouble he could get himself into otherwise?”

After closing the car door with a yank, Walter tried to loosen his tie, tight around his neck, but he hadn't succeeded: his fingers were trembling too much.

He was there, in front of the house. To him it seemed like a vision right out of one of his nightmares. And for a moment, he was happy he was armed.

Pushing it to the back of his mind, he gently pulled the gate towards him, applying pressure to raise it a little.

The old lock protested, and opened with a click, giving him no need to force it open. His brain may have lost memories but his body knew this place. And he knew how to get around it.

The man took large steps towards one side of the house. The rusted iron box on the garage wall immediately drew his attention and he smiled: it was the fuse box.

He opened it quickly, took pliers out from his interior pocket and began to cut cables left and right.

Aelita opened the scanner door, revealing an empty space.

"Yumi has also been transferred," Jeremy exclaimed, eyes riveted on his computer screen. "Go on Aelita, you're the last of the team."

The girl nodded, hesitated a moment, and eventually entered. The sliding door closed behind her and the bright light coming from the scanner ceiling gushed around her.

“Get ready!” Jeremy said. His voice came from the speakers inside the column, and seemed distorted and metallic.

Aelita closed her eyes.

She was on the verge of entering the second level of her father’s journal. Maybe she would find the answers she was looking for within it.

When she accessed a virtual world, the scanner released jets of air that made her levitate, raising her feet from the ground, her hair flying up like arrows and her whole body softly tingling... But none of that was happening now.

Aelita opened her eyes again. It was dark but she was still inside the column.

“What happened?” she cried, starting to bang against the scanner walls. It smelled burnt, and a dense smoke crept into her lungs, making her cough incessantly.

Jeremy rifled anxiously in his pockets, took out his phone and pressed some buttons. The small screen lit up, brightening the room, which had suddenly plunged into total darkness.

“Come on!” he said. “Use your phones to give us a little light!”

“What happened?” Ulrich asked.

“The power’s been cut! The scanner’s processors are fried and the column is filling with smoke!” Jeremy cried, his anxiety lining his voice. “We need to get Aelita out of there now!”

Ulrich gestured to Eva and the two ran out of the room, using their phones as torches. Several minutes later, they returned with a large shovel.

Ulrich slotted the iron part of the shovel in the crack between the scanner doors and began to push against the wooden handle.

“It’s full of smoke in here!” their friend’s cry came from within the column. “Help me!”

The metal door yielded in one blow, and Aelita fell out with her hands over her mouth and nose. Jeremy immediately approached her and took her in his arms.

“What happened?” the girl asked, confused.

“We don’t know. There was a blackout and the system short-circuited.”

Jeremy felt his temples palpitate. He was afraid. If the power had been cut but a moment later, right in the middle of Aelita’s transfer into the Mirror...she would have disappeared into nothing, lost in a broken digital flux.

Ulrich grabbed his friend by the shoulders. His pupils were completely dilated to adapt to the meagre light of the phones.

“Yumi and Odd!” he cried in despair. “What happened to them? What...”

“Don’t worry: they’re fine. The Mirror is a sort of sandbox inside the factory supercomputer, remember?” Jeremy soothed him. “They’re safe and sound inside the virtual world,” he reflected for a moment and adjusted his glasses

on his nose before continuing. "The only problem is that now, we can't get them out of there. The scanner is out of order."

"And if something happens to them while they're inside?" Aelita asked. "And if they encounter a monster?"

Jeremy didn't respond. It was better to not think about this possibility. At any rate, for the moment, there was nothing they could do.

Immediately after, the children jumped: noises, footsteps in the basement hallway, someone stumbling and falling, grumbling in a low voice.

Richard.

Jeremy and Ulrich left the secret room and illuminated the young man. He had a terrified expression on his face.

"Someone came," Richard warned them. "A man completely dressed in black. He cut the light cables and did weird things outside. He's coming this way now."

Jeremy looked at Ulrich and in his eyes saw the same thought as the one running through his own head: the men in black had found the Hermitage.

# 4

## FRAGMENTS OF THE PAST



Yumi looked all around her, somewhat perplexed.

The young girl was convinced that she was a genuine expert on virtual worlds. After all, she had experienced many adventures on Lyoko, and not too long ago, she had been to the First City thanks to some strange machines in Brussels. But this place was very bizarre. Or rather, to be more precise, it was normal.

It didn't contain the bright colours typically found in a cartoon, and the sky didn't seem to be an unrealistic shade of blue either. The young girl was currently on the street in a more usual city. Her city. Yumi knew this narrow back road surrounding tall buildings very well. It wasn't far from Kadic.

“Welcome,” Odd greeted her.

Her friend had the appearance of a catboy that he usually adopted while on Lyoko. He was dressed in purple overalls, his hands were covered with clawed gloves, and behind him swung a long tail.

Yumi had also experienced a transformation. Her hair was held up by small pins, her face was covered in white make-up, and she was dressed in a short kimono. Her feet were covered with traditional Japanese socks, known as *tabi*, and she was wearing a pair of wooden *geta* sandals. The *obi* sash that surrounded her waist hid the tops of her razor-sharp fans.

“Do you know where we are?” Odd asked her, while he jumped from side to side with the agility of a cat.

Yumi furrowed her eyebrows. Ulrich had maybe been right: Odd had been acting strange for some time now. How could he not know this street?

The girl motioned for him to follow her and walked from the road onto a wide avenue. Few cars drove around and there were even fewer pedestrians. The sky was largely gloomy as if the sun had barely begun to rise. It was dawn.

Yumi approached a passer-by with groggy eyes reading a recently-purchased newspaper.

“Excuse me...”

She bit her tongue for a moment. What would this man say if he saw her dressed like a geisha? But he completely ignored her, as if she didn't exist.

Unsure of herself, Yumi tried to give him a tap to get his attention, but her fingers passed right through him without managing to touch him. She had become a ghost!

“He can’t see me or hear me,” she murmured.

Odd squatted down in front of the man to get a glimpse of the front page of his newspaper.

“Now we know what day it is: *1st of June, 1994*. Does that mean anything?”

Yumi covered her mouth with her hands.

“Even you should know that, idiot! In five days, Hopper will take Aelita to Lyoko to hide there. In other words, it’ll be the start of all our adventures!”

“Are you saying that this is a reconstruction of that moment?”

“Looks that way,” nodded Yumi. “Maybe Hopper wanted to show Aelita something important. By the way, where is she? Why hasn’t she arrived yet?”

“The communication with the others is blocked,” Odd said, shaking his head. “The electricity is down at the Hermitage, and Aelita’s transfer was interrupted.”

Yumi examined his face fixedly, taken aback. How could he know these things?

Odd seemed to realise that he had said too much.

“Jeremy told me just after you arrived here...” he hurried to add. “And our communication was lost afterwards. But...” The young boy extended a claw, pointing his finger to the

other side of the street. “See that lady walking softly over there? Don’t you think she looks a lot like Professor Hertz?”

It did appear to be her, without a doubt, even though she seemed younger, with brown hair mixed with a little grey. She was dressed in a shirt and jeans, and had a slim physique. She didn’t resemble the calm professor that the children knew.

Yumi and Odd crossed the avenue, but the woman continued on her way without noticing their presence. She advanced with a lowered head and a busy look on her face.

“This nothing but a recording,” Yumi observed. “The same thing happened to Aelita when she visited the first level of the journal. We can’t do or say anything to anyone, only observe what happened ten years ago.”

Professor Hertz arrived at a small bar at the corner of the street. The owner was washing the bar, and the smell of recently-baked croissants fresh out of the oven began to float through the air. Yumi was shocked. In the virtual world, generally speaking, there was no sense of smell or taste. How had Hopper managed to reconstruct this place in such detail?

Another person was also in the bar: a woman with short, blonde hair and a pair of very dark, enormous sunglasses that hid the majority of her face. She was sitting at a table, alone.

“Major Steinback,” greeted the woman as she stood up.

“Agent Dido,” the professor replied with a neutral tone and an unexpressive face. “It’s been a long time.”

Hertz didn’t seem at all happy about this meeting. She ordered a coffee from the waiter and took the chair on the other side of the table, facing the mystery woman. Odd and Yumi sat on the ground, near the two women, to listen to them.

“Her name is Steinback,” the young girl murmured. “Do you remember what Aelita saw on the first level? Professor Hertz is the same woman that helped Hopper escape Carthage!”

Yumi couldn’t believe her eyes. Professor Hertz was an officer in the army!

The waiter brought the coffee, walking through Yumi while doing so. The young girl shuddered: it was all a crazy illusion... She remained hopeful that Jeremy would return soon as possible. She wanted to get out of here!

Dido took several sips of her coffee during the dead silence.

“You’ve been pretty busy these last few years,” she said while leaning forward, her eyes riveted to Hertz’s.

“What are you trying to say?”

“I know that you and Hopper live here and that you have continued to work on Project Carthage. I know that you have rebuilt the First City. And not just that: I also know how you enter it. I have access codes and by using old projects, we rebuilt the necessary equipment in Brussels to connect us to it. When running away, you left behind a series of notes.”

Hertz trembled. She knocked over her cup on the table and the dark liquid dripped onto the floor. Yumi jumped to her feet to avoid the mess, but the drops went through her without leaving a trace. So it was this woman, Dido, who had created the scanners in the apartment in Brussels. It wasn't the work of Hopper, but of Dido and her men in black.

"In any case," the professor retorted. "The notes won't help you. Adults cannot use the scanners."

Dido nodded and ignored the subject as if it didn't interest her.

"I asked to see you," she murmured. "To make something clear: I don't want to declare war against neither you nor Hopper."

"Seriously?" the woman replied after having studied her with uncertainty for several moments.

"Things have changed," said Dido. "After the fall of the Berlin wall, the cold war has ended. Project Carthage cost us an arm and a leg, and it has only created millions of problems. I think those on top are starting to fear it: the First City demonstrated itself to be completely uncontrollable, and if it is made operational, it could turn against us. In fact, the whole project is much too risky."

"Then?"

"When you escaped from our base, Hopper destroyed the prototype of the First City. After that, I erased the memories of those who had collaborated with you."

“You mean those who transformed Project Carthage into a weapon.”

“Nothing remains of those memories anymore,” replied Dido, making a vague gesture with her hand as if the subject was of no importance. “And I want the world to completely forget the existence of Carthage and the First City.”

“What do you mean, Dido?” said Hertz, standing.

“Speak with Hopper. Tell me where the Supercomputer that you have constructed is located and let me destroy it. I will erase your minds of certain confidential information, only the most dangerous details, and then leave you to live in peace. You two as well as Aelita. I’m offering you salvation.”

“Out of the question!” Hertz burst out.

“Be smart about this,” Dido insisted. “You know to what extent I can be dangerous.”

Something fell on Yumi’s head. The young girl turned towards Odd, her eyes shooting daggers.

“Really? You think this is a good time to be throwing things at me?”

“I didn’t do anything...” the boy protested.

Yumi looked at her feet where the object that just hit her had landed. It was a small, sky-blue box made of plastic that somewhat resembled a control box. Under a small screen were three red buttons. Two of them were in the shape of two-way arrows, one turned towards the right and the other towards the left, like the buttons for rewinding and fast-

forwarding a DVD. The third came with a small label: *FREE EXPLORATION*.

Yumi suddenly sensed that the coffee dripping onto the floor had soaked the material of her kimono. Embarrassed, she stood up and passed the box to Odd to try to squeeze it out, but the stain quickly began to dry up and disappeared in several seconds.

“Hey!” cried Yumi, surprised.

Odd didn’t even turn to look at her. He seemed absorbed in his thoughts.

He finally spoke, “This remote control is a navigation interface. Hopper programmed his diary so that he could highlight the events that were most important. We can move through them however we want through the city and across the days that are saved. This is the ‘free exploration’. Or we can jump directly to the interesting things, or go back if we missed something.”

The young girl couldn’t believe her ears. Her friend had never understood a word of technology before. Why did he seem so sure of himself now, like “Mister Know-It-All”?

“These two are continuing to talk, but they aren’t saying anything important... I propose that we move forward to see what else happened.”

Before Yumi had the time to protest, Odd pressed the button and the world started to dissolve around them. Dido and Professor Hertz started to become transparent, then com-

pletely disappeared. The walls and the roof, however, became darker and finally rained on them like a waterfall of colours.

Yumi started to feel vertigo, and she focused on Odd, his purple clothes and cat tail, the only elements that were still solid and real.

“Odd...” she murmured, falling to her feet.

“It’ll only last a moment,” said Odd, taking her by the hand. “It’s only a system update.”

“Huh?! Since when did you start talking like Jeremy?”

The images then recovered their clarity, and Yumi saw that everything had changed around the kids.

They found themselves in the old factory on the island. To be more precise, they were on the third underground floor, the lowest level, and the most secret.

The room was large and shone with a pale blue light. Almost the entire available space was occupied by a tall, dark, metal cylinder with a surface covered in strange, golden hieroglyphs. This was the Supercomputer that Lyoko’s existence depended on.

Yumi was so used to seeing it shut down and in the dark that she now felt a quivering of emotions that was spreading through her whole body in spurts. She turned towards Odd with a smile and saw that the child had eyes round like saucers and was trembling like jelly.

“Are you ok?” she asked him.

“Look,” he replied. “Hopper.”

Hidden behind the metal of the computer, Aelita's father was crouched down, working with a big screwdriver and a laptop at his side, placed on the ground. He was wearing a lab coat and had a long beard and a pair of round glasses. His face was very serious and seemed emaciated from lack of sleep.

A noise could be heard, and Hopper raised his head. Someone else had just entered the room through the lift that connected the underground levels with the main floor of the factory.

It was Professor Hertz, dressed in the same way she was during her meeting with Dido.

Yumi looked at the control box that Odd was clenching in his hands: on the screen appeared the text *1 June 1994 – 4:30pm*. They were on the same day and had only moved forward a few hours.

X.A.N.A. was shaking inside of Odd's body. He had worked so hard, acted in the shadows, hiding himself... And he was now only a step away from his triumph.

He was finally before the Supercomputer, the bridge to Lyoko. This was a different Lyoko, the Lyoko of 1994, but maybe only from there would it even be possible to surpass the barriers of the sandbox and access the real virtual world in which he could recover his strength.

The portion of X.A.N.A. inhabiting the body of Eva Skinner advised him to wait a bit and remain very attentive. Yumi had

been on the verge of discovering him when he had been carried away by his emotions and when he figured out the box to navigate the Mirror too quickly. He needed to take into account that Odd had only a pea brain...

But he was almost there... Lyoko! And if his calculations were correct, Hannibal Mago was about to arrive at the real factory, at the real Supercomputer. X.A.N.A. immediately realised that Kadice was under the surveillance of very sophisticated spy micro-cameras, and he had carried out some research. His capacities on the Internet were almost unlimited, and he hadn't been slow to investigate, to the very last detail, Mago and the Green Phoenix. Clearly, X.A.N.A. had preferred not to say a word to the children, given that in the future, the Green Phoenix could become a strong ally.

This stupid kid, Yumi, had seized him by the arm, forcing him to focus on Hopper and Hertz.

The professor listened to several sentences and then straightened up, shaking the screwdriver in the air as if it were a weapon.

"It's not possible!" he cried. "There was no way for Dido to know that we reconstructed the First City. We kept the secret absolutely hidden... It was our last hope to transform the project into a weapon for peace!"

"We should think carefully about our next step," said Hertz while she brushed past his shoulder. "Dido let slip a very important clue: she said that she erased the memories of her men. Doesn't that tell you anything?"

“Our memory-snatching machine,” whispered Hopper. “Someone sold the plans to our machine.”

“Yes,” Hertz confirmed. “We built it to fill the virtual world with real-world information... But if we used it with the polarity reversed, its effect would be precisely that of erasing people’s memories. It can’t be a simple coincidence that Dido possesses a similar device. There was only one person among us who knew of the existence of the sandbox, the First City and the memory-snatching machine...”

“And that person is...”

“Walter. Walter Stern.”

Yumi leapt up, placing her hands over her mouth, horrified.

“Ulrich’s father?” she cried. “But that’s not possible! It must be a mistake. I don’t believe it. IT’S IMPOSSIBLE!”

Odd also had jumped to his feet.

“Look, Hopper’s completely flipping out.”

Hopper began pacing around the Supercomputer room in big steps, his face obscured by a grave and sinister expression.

“Then there’s only one thing that I can do,” he declared at last. “Prepare an escape plan.”

“What are you talking about?” Hertz demanded, regarding him intensely.

“Aelita and I should leave here. I will take Code Down and divide it into several parts to prevent anyone from reconstructing it. And then, I will escape with my daughter.”

“Code Down?” whispered Yumi. “What’s that?”

X.A.N.A. hadn’t the slightest idea. He continued to listen to Hertz very attentively.

“You can’t do that! All that we’ve accomplished up until now...the creation of Lyoko and Code Down...it’ll all be completely lost.”

“I will leave several tracks. I will hide information that only Aelita and I will be able to follow.”

“Why Aelita?” asked Hertz all while shaking her head. “She’s still so young!”

“Think about it,” smiled Hopper. “The men in black want to find me, and I don’t know how much time we still have. They could capture me, but I’m sure that I’ll be able to save Aelita one way or another. So, when she is older, she can learn what happened. I plan to create a virtual diary. I will use my memories, yours...whatever information I could need to trace out a ‘map’ that Aelita will be capable of interpreting.”

Hertz nodded her head.

“And me?” she asked. “What should I do?”

“Call the friends working with us and have a meeting with them,” Hopper said after thinking for an instant. “Invent whatever kind of excuse... For example, that Walter wants us to fire us all. When everyone’s together, use the memory-snatching machine on them. They will forget everything: Lyoko, the factory, the computer... They will be safe. Once this is done, you and I will speak face-to-face with Walter...and finally, I will run far away from here.”

“And what will we do with Lyoko?” Hertz asked him.

“I will shut it down. I have no other option: X.A.N.A. is becoming more and more dangerous. The virus that got into the First City could make him suddenly become crazy. It’s a bug, a programming error, and it’s possible that X.A.N.A. wasn’t affected...but all the ‘human’ training that we submitted him to over the months could also slip away. And well...I don’t know what could happen.”

X.A.N.A. remained there, listening to the conversation, mouth open, hidden inside the virtual version of Odd. Virus? Programming error? Training? What was Hopper talking about?

Next, without warning, an image dating from numerous years ago reappeared in his mind. In general, he held these memories far off in his mind, hidden away in a sure, but distant corner of his digital memory. But all at once, he saw the image of Aelita before his eyes, although not the child that he had known in reality, the friend of Eva Skinner, but the Aelita that he had met a long time ago, the one who played with him in the deserted city.

X.A.N.A. had a very different character then, and he played with Aelita in the parks, transforming himself into a multitude of amusing animals, and he would wait for her at the doors of the great wall. Every afternoon. Up until the day when Aelita no longer came to play with him.

That was why on this day, many years ago, his friend didn't come to meet him like always: Hopper had prevented it.

X.A.N.A. exploded with rage.

Yumi felt a violent hit that threw her to the side. In front of her, Hopper and Hertz continued to pronounce the same sentences that they had said ten years earlier. But the young girl was in no condition to listen anymore.

She rolled over. Her friend, Odd, fell to his knees, and he grasped his throat with both hands. He seemed to be suffocating. From his mouth came a black smoke so dense that it blasted Yumi, throwing her to the ground.

"X.A.N.A..." she murmured, shocked.

The young girl knew this smoke too well: it was the same that she had seen come out from the mouth of William Dunbar, one of her school friends, when X.A.N.A. had taken control of his body.

Odd collapsed. The cloud of smoke started to condense into a breathtaking whirlwind that took form bit by bit until it became solid.

The young girl leapt to her feet.

The box fell to the ground. She had to recover it and advance to the next part of the recording, far away from here. She needed to escape. But...

"Don't even think about moving," a human voice spoke, freezing her in place.

The smoke had disappeared, and in its place a boy had appeared. He was exactly like William Dunbar, with dark hair that was slightly long, a straight nose, and a self-confident expression. He was a little taller than Yumi, and had an athletic physique.

“Who... Who are you?”

“You already said my name before. You know me. I am X.A.N.A., and I am back.”

# 5

## FAMILY REUNION



Walter Stern had seen the guy flee into the garage.

At first, while he was cutting the Hermitage's power cables, he had thought that it was just his imagination, but he had then noticed disorderly shoeprints in the mud. And other prints, belonging to smaller feet. Kids.

He sighed. At least they weren't Hannibal Mago's men. For a moment, Walter wanted to leave his weapon in its holster. Carrying a weapon made him nervous. He rethought this and grabbed it, just to be safe.

If there were children here, they must have been spooked and made a run for it. So he would have enough time to secure the Hermitage.

Walter arrived at the garage and checked the "sliding" door handle. It was open.

He prepared for the assault.

Ulrich gestured to Eva and watched her hide behind the door panel connecting the garage to the house. He remained squatted behind the small couch occupying part of the back wall. At his feet were several rubber globes that Jeremy had filled with disgusting chemical products he'd found in the Hermitage basement.

Ulrich sighed. He and Eva were the first line of defence against the men in black while Jeremy, Richard and Kiwi, in bad shape, watched the main entrance, ready to sound the alarm if need be.

The teen took the walkie-talkie, part of Jeremy's special equipment, and spoke into it.

"The garage door just moved," he murmured. "He's coming in. It's up to you, over."

He took the first projectile and held his breath.

He had to be very careful. These men could be armed. The plan was very simple: attack the intruders with the globes and take advantage of the element of surprise to jump on and immobilise them with rope.

It was dangerous but Ulrich was an expert in martial arts, and above all, he had no other choice. With Yumi and Odd in the Mirror, they couldn't let the Hermitage fall into enemy hands. It was a question of life or death.

The garage door was raised very slowly. Ulrich could already see the enemy's feet. He was wearing men's shoes,

black and shiny, and somewhat formal-looking. He then caught a glimpse of his pants, also black.

He indicated to Eva to prepare herself. They had to wait to see this man's face in order to hit him right in the head.

He concentrated on the door again, still raising, allowing the milky light of the winter afternoon to flood in.

Ulrich turned the throwing weapon in the palm of his hand. It was a small sphere of clear plastic and its volume flabbily shifted and adapted to the boy's fingers, a gross feeling against his skin. The enemy's shoulders were in sight, then his chin. Just one more second... Fire!

He sprang up in a single bound and threw his arm back like a catapult, ready to launch his projectile. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Eva come out of her hiding spot, in perfect synchronisation with him. The man in black was standing in front of them. Against the light coming from outside, he was just a silhouette on which the contours of the epaulettes of his jacket and his sunglasses loomed.

Ulrich let his globe fall to the ground, immobile, mouth wide open.

"Dad..." he whispered.

Eva's projectile, on the other hand, quickly flew into the air and hit its target right in the face.

"That buuuurns!" Walter cried, reeling as he recoiled.

"DAD!" Ulrich yelled, running towards him.

He couldn't believe his eyes. What was his father doing dressed in this way, and with a gun in his hand?

Ulrich approached his father, who was wiping his clothing and face with a handkerchief. Once the shock wore off, Jeremy and Aelita went to fix the power cables that Walter had cut, while Richard and Eva decided to give the father and son some private time.

Ulrich's friends had all been very surprised, but much less so than he. His father had always been a cold and distant man, serious and severe. But the mere idea of him being involved in this whole stupid thing...and that he was one of the men in black!

Ulrich remembered the sinister men who had chased himself and Yumi around the roads of Brussels. Lone Wolf and his two myrmidons, Weasel and Ferret. Did his father know them?

"Darn," said Walter Stern, refolding the handkerchief and leaving it on the table. "It was lucky I was wearing my sunglasses, or this concoction would have made me blind."

"It's something Jeremy whipped up," Ulrich replied, shrugging. "He assured us that the effects would wear off. You've already washed your face, so you shouldn't have any problems."

For the first time, father and son looked each other in the eye. The boy realised that his father was a tired man. His face showed signs of wrinkles, and an army of white hairs was forging a path through his hair.

"Can I ask what you're doing here?" the teen said after another sigh.

“I could ask you the same thing.”

Ulrich ground his teeth. He and his father had always maintained a difficult relationship, and maybe it was time to change things and let him know that he was no longer a little boy.

“Listen, I already understand some things,” he exclaimed. “Like Lone Wolf, for example.”

Walter didn’t respond but Ulrich noticed that, for a second, his eyes were almost popping out of their sockets.

“I need to make an important call,” murmured his father while rummaging through his suit pockets.

Ulrich leaned on the table separating them and made an effort to smile.

“First, you and I have to talk about some things, don’t you agree? You tell me your story, and I’ll do the same. Maybe that’ll be good for the both of us.”

He surprised himself with his words. The sentence showed a certain wisdom and it was about as eloquent as something Jeremy would have come up with. Or Yumi. In the end, maybe it was true that he had matured.

After several seconds of silence, Walter Stern began to recount his version of the story.

“Before everything else, I need to tell you that I’ve forgotten everything. Especially the important things. They used a machine... Well, I’ll tell you about that later. It was just to warn you that I can’t explain absolutely everything. There are gaps, and there’s nothing I can do about them.”

Ulrich nodded without replying. A machine that erased memories? That sounded just like what happened to Odd's father and Yumi's parents.

"In the '90s," his father continued, "I worked for dangerous people, a criminal organisation. At the time, I lived here, in the Parisian region, while your mother lived in another city with you. You were very young. And you didn't suspect anything. You didn't know that I...I wasn't a good father. I know a professor that called himself Hopper. He was looking for funds to complete some project and the organisation I worked for ordered me to help him. They gave me money, lots of money, and in exchange, I had to wait for Hopper to complete his experiments to then hand the results over to the criminals."

Ulrich remained silent but pressed his hands against his forehead. He didn't know what to say. Who was his father really?

"Though it wasn't that easy," Walter continued. At one point, a government agency following the professor's movements got in contact with me. Hopper...you see, over time, we had become friends. And despite that, I accepted to sell him out, to reveal what he was hiding. And I betrayed him."

Walter Stern cried.

Ulrich turned his gaze away from him, angry and not knowing what to say. His father had been a traitor. What could be worse than that? He wanted to leave the place and never see him again.

“They told me that I’d end up in prison, that I’d spend the rest of my days there, that I would never see you again, you and your mother. It was either that or help them, turn over a new leaf and trust them to protect me from the criminals I collaborated with. So I accepted. But then, someone erased my memory. I don’t know what became of Hopper, nor any of the people working with him. I don’t remember anything except for what I’ve just told you. I don’t remember anything but my guilt. Overnight, I found myself with nothing, not even my memories. I didn’t even know that I’d lived here. That memory didn’t resurface until this morning, when they ordered me to come out of retirement.”

“If that’s the case, why did you decide to enrol me at Kad-ic?”

“I don’t know. Maybe a part of all that remained in me, in a part of my subconscious... I really don’t know.”

Walter rested his head in his hands and Ulrich observed him without a word. His rage began to wither. Who had done that to him? Erase entire fragments of his life, leaving nothing but guilt and remorse? For more than ten years, his father had held the weight of this secret, locked up in his chest.

“So you know Aelita,” he said.

“Who?”

“Hopper’s daughter.”

“No...” his father responded, giving him a look full of doubt. “I didn’t know he had a daughter. Or rather, maybe I knew, but...everything is so confused...”

“Come with me,” exhorted Ulrich.

The boy left his father with his friends and exited the house. He needed to be alone to think.

At that moment, he would have liked to have Yumi by his side: she would have known what to say. But the girl wasn't there, rather locked in a virtual world she couldn't get out of... Because of his father.

Once in the garden, Ulrich began to practise a *kata*, a martial arts exercise made up of a series of movements carried out in a precise order. He chose his favourite, called *Heian Sandan*, the third peace of mind *kata*.

His father worked for the men in black. His father was Walter Stern, the traitor.

Without warning, what Yumi had said several hours earlier came back to him. The man with two dogs had attacked Odd's father, who, later in hospital, hadn't stopped talking about something to do with someone called Walter, who had betrayed him, fired him.

Was there another secret behind that? Something that connected his father to Odd's parents, and maybe even Yumi's?

Ulrich spread his legs and shifted his weight to his knees, taking the *kiba-dachi* pose, the horse stance. And he then became completely petrified, without managing to make the second move.

He had to get inside and talk to Jeremy.

Jeremy cleaned his glasses with his shirt before placing them back on the bridge of his nose.

Aelita, Eva, Richard, Ulrich's father and he were shut in the kitchen of the Hermitage, with Kiwi lying on the ground, concentrating on a bowl of milk. Ulrich had gone into the garden. After listening to Walter Stern's story, Jeremy perfectly understood everything.

Since the beginning, Lyoko had been a personal adventure. His and Aelita's. Afterwards, little by little, their group had gotten bigger, formed by the rest of their friends. But all that was different now: Ulrich's father had known and betrayed Hopper.

It was as if in a single blow, the whole story had become far too complex for them. How could they confront secret agents and criminal organisations alone?

He observed Aelita. The girl was still as a statue, eyes filled with tears. All this had been a great shock for her. Ulrich's father was also immobile, overwhelmed by the idea of Hopper's daughter only being thirteen.

They both had so much to say, but it would have to wait for another time. Now, they had to reflect and rationalise.

And when it came to that sort of thing, Jeremy was invincible.

"What was the name of the criminal organisation you worked for? Do you remember?" he asked Walter.

“I discovered it today when I arrived in the city,” the man nodded. “Their boss is called Hannibal Mago, and the terrorist group is the Green Phoenix.”

Green Phoenix. That mysterious name that was written in the sewers and on the factory doors. Everything was becoming clear.

“And did they didn’t know where the supercomputer was, right? You were the only one who knew and you forgot.”

“No,” Walter responded, shaking his head. “I... I didn’t tell anyone where the factory was. Neither the terrorists nor the men in black. It’s one of the few things I remember clearly. They wanted to know, of course, but my memory was erased before I could talk.”

Jeremy was on the verge of relaxing in his chair, satisfied with the response, but Walter continued to talk.

“But now, both the agents and the Phoenix men know where the computer is. The Green Phoenix got to the factory this morning. I saw Hannibal Mago and a man with two dogs who drives around in a pickup truck. And a lot of soldiers.”

“That’s impossible,” Jeremy exclaimed. “If they know where the computer is, why wait all this time before doing anything?”

“They didn’t know anything,” Eva responded, “until we told them so. Do you remember the man with dogs’ technology, which was capable of making him disappear from the video taken by our closed-circuit cameras? I’ll bet that he had

us under surveillance, and that he followed us there without us knowing.”

Jeremy slammed his fist against the kitchen table. What could they do now?

It was at that precise moment that Ulrich entered the room and turned to him.

“I’ve just had an idea,” he exclaimed.

Hannibal Mago smiled.

The three men in black were lying on the floor, feet and hands bound, and their mouths sealed by scotch tape.

“Where did you find them?” Mago asked.

Grigory Nictapolus pointed to an area not far from the factory gantry, in the direction of the bridge connecting the small island to the mainland.

“My doggies dug them out,” he said as a scary smile spread across his face. “They were spying on us.”

Mago nodded and turned around. They were just the other side of the entrance, on a suspended metal footbridge. The factory was a gigantic, red-brick structure with walls covered in filthy windows. On the level below them there were piles of pipes, reels of cables and a large assortment of machinery covered in a thick layer of dust. And then, the lift to the underground levels containing the supercomputer.

“Dido has made her move, as we predicted,” Mago said. “But she has underestimated us. If she thinks that three imbeciles could slip under our noses...she’s very wrong.”

“Do you want me to make them disappear?” Grigory murmured, gesturing to the gun on the belt of his pants.

“No. That would start a war and we have too much to do to deal with distractions. Load these three men into your pickup and abandon them in the open country, far from the city. Someone will find them sooner or later.”

Mago bent down to the one who seemed to be the boss of the trio, with a hooked nose and short, black hair. He leaned in until his mouth was but a few centimetres from the man’s face.

“Tell Dido,” he whispered, “that she is not to interfere. If I ever see you here again...”

He didn’t need to finish his sentence: the agent understood perfectly.

“He’s not responding. His phone is off,” Walter said, snapping his phone shut.

Jeremy looked at him and nodded. The man with dogs had shown he knew how to do his job, and it was more than likely that the same thing could be said of his boss.

“Lone Wolf told me that if he doesn’t respond, my mission would be to secure the Hermitage’s perimeter and immediately contact Dido.”

“Wait,” Jeremy stopped him. “If the men in black also want to protect the factory, they could be on our side, help us.”

“What about my idea?” Ulrich interrupted, seeming impatient.

“Precisely.”

Jeremy sat back down at the kitchen table.

“From what we know,” he said, leaning towards Walter Stern, “some time ago, you worked with Robert Della Robbia, Odd’s father. And it’s possible that Yumi’s parents, the Ishiyamas, had something to do with all that in one way or another. Because of this, before deciding our next step, we should find out who else is involved. With a little luck, someone could be able to help us.”

“You’re just kids...” Walter contradicted him, shaking his head.

“Kids,” intervened Aelita who, eyes still red, had remained silent for a long time, since she learned that the man in front of her had betrayed her father, “who turned the supercomputer on and confronted the dangers of Lyoko: X.A.N.A. and a wealth of other things that you couldn’t even imagine. We have matured. Now, it’s up to you to decide whether you’re going to fight at our side or not.”

Her words had been spot on. Jeremy observed Walter, who looked at their faces one by one, thinking. He finally looked at Ulrich fixedly, and gave a sad smile.

“I know I’ve made big mistakes that will follow me for years, but everything is different now, and maybe this is my chance to make up for them. I’m with you, kids.”

“And these names?” Jeremy insisted.

“I only remember the person who erased my memory after discovering I was the one who betrayed Hopper. It was his collaborator...Professor Hertz.”

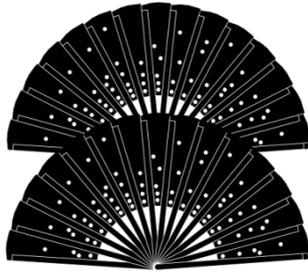
“The teacher?” Jeremy asked, bringing a hand to his mouth. “But...that’s completely impossible!”

“Of course...” said Aelita, nodding again and again. “That’s why that Major Steinback I saw in my father’s journal seemed so familiar. I admit that she really resembles her, but even I still can’t believe it.”

Ulrich wordlessly stood, approached his father and held him in his arms.

# 6

## THE MEMORY- SNATCHING MACHINE



Odd was huddled up on the ground with his eyes shut and his breathing shallow. But at least he was still alive.

*Where the heck are you, Jeremy?* thought Yumi.

She needed his help to get out of this terrible situation, but instead, for the first time, she found herself completely alone in a virtual world.

She had X.A.N.A. in front of her, hands on his hips. His mouth was twisted into a distrustful frown.

“Last time, you really hurt me. You injected a virus into the core of Lyoko. You don’t know just how painful it was to have to reconstruct myself piece by piece...and I haven’t finished yet. That’s why I’m here with you and this ridiculous human.”

He motioned towards Odd's body on the floor before continuing, "To recover all my power, I need to return to Lyoko. And, what a coincidence, the Supercomputer is right in front of us. And, on the floor above, the scanners. My mission is almost complete."

Yumi reeled, her mind working at the speed of light. She finally decided to challenge him.

She gave a laugh, "You didn't understand any of what Jeremy told us the other night, did you? Hopper's journal is a sandbox! It's isolated from the central system of the Supercomputer. The objects here pass through us. We can't do anything with them! There is no Lyoko here."

"Stupid kid," responded X.A.N.A. with a smirk. "You shouldn't underestimate me. I examined this world we are in, the Mirror, in great detail... See this screwdriver on the floor?"

The young girl nodded her head.

"Take the control box in one hand and grab the screwdriver in the other. Go on, try it."

Yumi obeyed. To her surprise, his fingers enveloped the object, clearly feeling its volume, and she could lift it. Or to be more precise, she could lift a copy of it. There was now a screwdriver on the ground, in its original position, and another grasped in her hand. The two tools seemed so real... Yumi could feel its weight in her hand, and the consistency and exact form of the screwdriver. Frightened, the girl opened her hand...and the object, instead of falling, re-

mained in the air while becoming more and more transparent before disappearing in smoke, as if it never even existed, leaving only the original, which hadn't moved in the slightest.

"You see?" explained X.A.N.A. "The box is the interface that allows us to interact with this world. Clearly, we cannot modify anything... Which is why the screwdriver became doubled, leaving the original on the floor. The good thing is that, in reality, the box isn't even necessary. It's enough just to send the digital command directly to the Mirror's computer."

While the creature spoke, Yumi put away the box in her *obi*, then moved her hands to her back to grab hold of her fans that she still kept in her sash.

She opened them in one fluid movement of her fingers and threw them forward. The two half-moons of metal flew in a flash towards X.A.N.A., spinning and slicing through the air with a high-pitched shrill.

The young man quickly dropped to his knees, squatting and easily avoiding the two projectiles, but this fraction of a second was just what Yumi was hoping for. She jumped to the side and rolled on the factory floor to reach Odd's unconscious body.

She took his hand. The boy's fingers were frozen. Yumi grabbed the control box again while letting out her breath, hearing X.A.N.A. cry, "Stop!"

She didn't listen. She pressed the Fast Forward button twice, and the world began to dissolve around her.

Professor Hertz was hunched over her desk with her head in her hands. Jeremy felt a surge of emotion seeing her in this state.

They had come into her office without warning. All of them, Walter included. The professor looked her old enemy in the eyes and understood everything.

“You discovered it,” she whispered finally.

Jeremy stood from the pile of magazines where he sat. The professor’s desk resembled an old chemistry lab table with books spread across it and covering the floor. There were test tubes full of strange coloured liquids, a half-assembled oscilloscope, and a plastic human skeleton that she used for anatomy courses.

The boy advanced, dodging all the knick-knacks, and arrived in front of the professor and placed a hand on her shoulder.

“But it’s better this way, right?”

Hertz’s eyes moved towards Aelita. Jeremy saw a sad smile drawn on her face.

“Hopper’s daughter,” she said, almost with a sigh. “When you were assigned to my class, I didn’t believe for a second that you were Odd’s cousin. I knew it was you, that you had managed to escape Lyoko. But part of me didn’t want to believe it, and so I never said anything. I held onto that uncertainty. I hoped to avoid bringing you more pain.”

Aelita approached the professor.

“I didn’t know that you were a friend of my father.”

“And your mother, Anthea. And yes, of course, I was their friend. But I didn’t know how to protect them like I wanted to.”

“So then...” said Jeremy, while scratching his nose in thought. “You didn’t lose your memory. Is that correct?”

Walter, Ulrich, Eva and Richard were all standing upright in the middle of the room, a bit intimidated.

The professor invited them to make themselves comfortable before beginning to explain:

“Waldo and I needed a method to add everything necessary onto Lyoko: trees and rocks, frozen areas, desert sand, *et cetera*. We had decided that that quickest way to do this was to take the images directly from our memories and deposit them into the Supercomputer. So, we built the memory-snatching machine. It was only later that we discovered that the machine could also be used to do the opposite, and with more intensity, to erase peoples’ memories.

“Someone,” the professor’s eyes moved towards Walter, “sold the plans for our device to Green Phoenix and the men in black. We understood that this person was also capable of revealing the location of Lyoko’s Supercomputer, so I personally used the machine to erase his memory of all information pertinent to the subject.”

“But with some luck,” Walter intervened now, “we could reverse the effect! It might yet still be possible to give me back my memories.”

“I’m sorry,” replied Hertz, lowering her head. “It’s completely impossible. I used the machine to its fullest extent. I fear that your memory is lost forever.”

“Then?” asked Jeremy. “What happened?”

“We caught Walter before he could reveal the location of the Supercomputer. Next, I erased the memories of all the other related persons, including our collaborators, because I wanted them and their families to also be safe. But, in any case, Walter had already said too much... The men in black knew where Waldo was. They assailed the Hermitage, and he took refuge on Lyoko with Aelita. Because I had erased Walter and our collaborators’ memories, neither Dido nor the Green Phoenix knew where the Supercomputer was. They combed the sewers during these months, but it’s a real maze in there. So finally, Hannibal Mago’s terrorists were forced to give up, and the men in black decided to erase the memory of the only person who still remembered something... In other words, me.”

Hertz paused, took a breath and ran her fingers through her grey hair before continuing to speak, “Except they didn’t consider one tiny detail: I was the one who invented the memory-snatching machine. After some time, I found several of my notes and managed to put it back together again from scratch...and then I used it on myself. That is how I recovered my memory.”

Jeremy’s mouth was wide open, and it took him a while to find the words to continue.

“You mean that you erased the memories of all the professor’s collaborators? But who were these people? Do we know them?”

“Oh, yes,” replied Hertz while giving a tired smile. “You know them well. The team who helped Waldo build Lyoko was formed by myself, naturally, as well as Walter – who was in charge of financing us – Takeho and Akiko Ishiyama, Robert Della Robbia and lastly, Michel Belpois.”

“My father?” gasped Jeremy, who suddenly felt weak. His father had helped Hopper?

“Your father,” confirmed Hertz, nodding her head. “And Odd’s father. And Yumi’s parents. And Ulrich’s father. We formed Waldo’s team, just like how you and your friends form Aelita’s team now.”

Jeremy collapsed. He remained slumped on the floor like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

Hannibal Mago had ordered his men to set up an emerald green tent on the ground floor of the factory and fill it with comfortable cushions and rich rugs decorated in complex arabesque styles. In one of the corners, there was a computer with three large screens that allowed him to control his business affairs from around the world.

Mago sat cross-legged on a woven emerald rug. He was still wearing his suit and his wide-brimmed hat, but he had taken off his shoes, remaining just in his socks – violet-coloured and made of silk, of course. His fingers, covered in

rings, skimmed over and picked at a bowl of couscous with some greens that he ate in an Arab manner, without silverware, just by using his thumb, index and middle fingers. *This couscous is bland*, he thought. *I should have brought my personal chef from Morocco.*

“May I come in, sir?” asked Memory from outside the tent.

“Of course, dear.”

The woman entered with a firm gait. Her hair was held up in a bun that showed off her thin neck and the golden necklace around it. She was wearing a laboratory coat over a beautiful jacket and a profound look of fatigue was present in her eyes...

“I finished the verifications, sir. Everything is ready.”

“And the supercomputer?”

“It’s still shut down. We’re waiting for you to turn it on. I’ve checked all the connections from the third underground level, where the Supercomputer is, up to the first, where the controls are located. We are ready to boot it up at any moment.”

“Excellent,” nodded Mago complacently. “And the volunteers for the first test?”

“They are also ready.”

Both then exited the nomadic tent and crossed the ground floor of the factory to the lift that would take them underground. They had soldiers in uniform all about who would bump together the heels of their boots in a rigid martial salute whenever the two would pass by them.

The lift was a simple metal cage controlled by a mundane box and suspended by a large cable. They descended down into the depths of the factory.

“Give me a summary of the situation,” ordered Mago.

“I used our most sophisticated technology,” answered the woman rapidly. “First off, I restored the secondary electrical systems to activate the small, hidden keyboard for the lift that would allow access to all the levels of the underground laboratory. Next, I spent some time carefully examining the Supercomputer’s hardware. I can confirm without a doubt that Hopper acted just as we had expected: in order to neutralise the weapon the First City contains, he completely isolated its environment. In any case, it’s as if the First City is located in a different Supercomputer that’s disconnected from this one. In excluding it from the network, he rendered it unusable.”

“Continue.”

“To directly enter the First City would be pointless: we’d be blocked without a means to act. That’s why we will virtualise a command unit on Lyoko, which, unlike the First City, will be connected to the network and the electronic devices of our world. From Lyoko, the command unit should make it to the core, the fifth sector, and find a passage there to communicate between Lyoko and the First City. Once this ‘bridge’ is open, we can access the weapon and put it to use, to finally use it in the real world.”

The lift stopped at the third underground floor and the sliding door opened in front of them.

Hannibal Mago and Memory entered into a spacious room occupied almost entirely by an imposing cylinder that rose all the way up to the ceiling. It was the Supercomputer. The room was dark, but Mago's men had placed powerful projectors all around the tower. A dozen soldiers were aligned along the walls. When they turned to see their commander, they gave him their full attention.

Memory led him up to the tower and signalled for him to pull a lever situated on one of the sides of the machine.

"By pulling it down, we'll reactivate the Supercomputer. Then, we'll ride back up to the control room to transfer our men to Lyoko. If you'd do the honours."

Mago put his hands on the lever. He felt a wave go through his skin from his feet to his head, and felt a slight taste of electricity in his mouth.

"Just like we said," he spoke with a certain sense of sarcasm. "It's a small step for man, but the domination of the world for Green Phoenix."

He yanked the lever down.

There was a small, blue spark, and then, nothing.

After several minutes of waiting, Mago seemed extremely irritated, but Memory motioned for him to wait a bit more. At that precise moment, while Memory still had her hand in the air, the walls of the room became illuminated and a collec-

tion of intense golden hieroglyphs started to rise over the surface of the tower.

The Supercomputer was alive once more.

It was very cold on the terrace of the final floor of the student dormitories. The moon was covered with cottony, black clouds and the chill in the air was sharp as a blade.

Aelita pulled her large jacket tighter around her shivering body, but didn't want to go back inside. The earpieces of her MP3 player were filling her ears with the notes of Goldberg Variations from the composer Johann Sebastian Bach, in one of the revolutionary versions that the pianist Glenn Gould had recorded in his youth. Aelita was a good DJ and generally preferred to listen to dance music, which was more modern and rhythmic. But not tonight. Tonight, Bach's melodies brought her back to a past self that had been hidden in the deepest part of her memories for a long time. She saw images of herself, small and seated in front of a piano, her father looking at her while playing with a smile.

The young girl caressed the golden chain she was wearing around her neck. Two letters were engraved in it, a *W* and an *A*, and just below them was a sailor's knot. Waldo and Anthea, forever united. Her parents who could never be together again.

Aelita sighed. Her friends were stricken by the avalanche of revelations that Professor Hertz had thrown at them, but for her, it was even more difficult. Ulrich's father was the

man who had sold her father out. Without him, things would maybe have been different.

When leaving the professor's office, Ulrich had stared at her with a gloomy expression without saying a word, and he didn't show up at the cafeteria for dinner either. He felt ashamed and sorry, and Aelita had no idea what to tell him. At this time, she hated him a little and she hated Walter Stern...

A pair of hands landed on her shoulders, and the young girl jumped. She immediately removed her earbuds and turned around.

"Aelita," Jeremy said to her, about ready to burst out in laughter. "I called you, but you didn't hear me."

The young boy was bundled up in a thick coat with a fur-lined hood that almost entirely hid his face. He resembled an Eskimo, which made her give a small chuckle.

Jeremy hugged her affectionately.

"I can only imagine how you must feel," he whispered. "It's much more complicated for you than for the rest of us. What we discovered today was unbelievable. And difficult to accept."

"I've thought," the girl responded after a long sigh, "about enough bad things, you know?"

"Remember, what's done is done, and there's nothing we can do about it. But the future, on the other hand, we can change. You're surrounded by so many friends, and even new allies. Walter..."

“Don’t talk about him, please!”

Jeremy caressed her cheek, but continued where he left off.

“Walter Stern regrets what he did. For ten years now, he’s been regretting what he did. He doesn’t remember anything aside from his mistakes and the pain that he’s caused with them. He’s on our side now. He’s a different man. And Ulrich’s always been with us.”

Aelita said nothing. Jeremy was right, of course, but it was very difficult for her to calm her feelings.

“Then what should we do now?” she asked after several minutes.

“Yumi and Odd are still inside the Mirror and we should get them out of there. Furthermore, we know that the Green Phoenix has taken control of the factory.”

“You want to try to contact the commander of the men in black, right? This Dido.”

Jeremy nodded, “We can’t confront the Green Phoenix and the men in black. I also want to return to the Hermitage with Professor Hertz and try to repair the scanner. We will help our friends to escape the virtual universe. And we will save the world.”

Aelita gave a slight mocking laugh. Jeremy was the only person that she knew who was capable of saying these things so seriously. And he was totally serious.

“And how do you think we’ll save the world this time?”

“Hopper’s secret codes, Hertz’s files, and all the rest. They are important, and only the professor can manage to understand what they mean.”

“Ok, fine, I’m in,” said Aelita, grasping his hand. “We will ask Dido to ally with us. But only on one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“That I be the one who talks with her on the phone.”

Eva Skinner knocked on the door to Professor Hertz’s office. No-one responded. It was already nine o’clock at night, but the idea that she had gone home didn’t cross her mind. Not after everything that had happened this afternoon.

Eva only had to slightly brush the lock with her fingernail, giving off a small spark to release it. The door opened, and the girl poked her head inside.

The professor wasn’t there.

X.A.N.A. felt himself become enraged. A part of him was trapped inside the Mirror and communication between them was worsening more and more each time. If the situation continued like this, he would lose all contact with his other half the next day. To be divided between two different bodies was a strange sensation, even though he was an enormously sophisticated artificial intelligence, used to doing several things at once and reasoning simultaneously on several trains of thought.

What really worried him was something else. The kids had discovered that Hertz helped Hopper. And that meant that

sooner or later, they would try to resolve the puzzle of mysterious codes that the professor left behind before disappearing.

They hadn't the slightest chance of doing so.

When Eva stole the file from Jeremy's room, X.A.N.A. only needed to scan over each page once to memorise them all in precise photographic detail. He could recall each symbol and each word, but he hadn't made any logical sense of these papers. For this reason, several days earlier, he returned them to the professor so that she wouldn't notice they had disappeared. Maybe this woman, if correctly questioned, could give him a key clue. These codes could be his opportunity to recover all his powers in the blink of an eye without even needing to access Lyoko. And now that the situation had started to speed up, it was time to act.

Eva entered the professor's office and placed her hands on the computer on the table. He only needed a few seconds to access the internal school network and find the information he was searching for. At this exact moment, there was a computer connected to the Internet in the chemistry lab. Hertz must be there.

Eva exited the office and once again fiddled with the lock. Then, she left the building and crossed through the tree-lined paths of the park to reach the building containing the science laboratories. The door was open. She stepped in.

For X.A.N.A., it would be very easy to leave the child's body to threaten Hertz. But he didn't know what would hap-

pen to his other side in the Mirror and Eva was possibly his last chance of entering Lyoko. Recovering his powers was of the utmost importance, and he couldn't make a single mistake. In his electronic brain, the probabilities and necessary movements aligned like an immense game of chess. Every simulation coincided on one single course of action: he should interrogate Hertz, but it was not yet time to reveal himself as being within Eva's body.

He arrived at the chemistry lab and turned on the light.

"Professor?" he asked with an innocent child-like voice.

"Can I talk to you?"

A small door to the side opened and Hertz' puffy cloud of silver hair leaned out.

"Eva? What are you doing here at this hour?"

"I need to speak with you," said the young girl, shrugging.

The laboratory was a large room with a chair on a small wooden scaffold crossing the width of the room and a bunch of large tables full of microscopes and other instruments in the centre. Four green chalkboards covered from top to bottom with mathematical formulas were suspended on one of the walls.

Hertz sat on the chair and managed a smile. X.A.N.A. realised that he couldn't ask her about the file. She didn't know that it had disappeared, nor that Eva was the one who had put it back. The better option would perhaps be to approach the professor instead, kiss her and possess her. No-one

would realise and this woman's was full of important information.

*Analysis of the probability of success: 87%.*

The calculation appeared in an instant before Eva's eyes, who smiled. She took a step towards the professor.

"So, well, I..." she murmured.

She made a face mixed with a sense of worry and trouble. Hertz's smile became warmer and more sympathetic. Eva took another step forward, arms held out, like a child asking an adult to take them in their arms and console them.

"I..." she repeated.

"Professor Hertz!" yelled Jeremy, entering the room. "I couldn't find you in your office, so I thought that you might be here in the lab. Do you have a minute?"

Aelita entered just behind him, cheeks red from running, and Eva stepped back from the woman. All he had needed was just a bit longer... No more than an instant!

"And here I was hoping to have some peace and quiet!" sighed the professor.

"There's no time for that," objected Jeremy with a smile. "We need to get in contact with Dido as soon as possible."

# 7

## THE GRAND ALLIANCE



Aelita put on the headset while Jeremy helped the professor.

They were in the chemistry lab and everything was ready for the videoconference.

Walter, Ulrich, Richard and Eva were seated at the students' benches, at the back of the monitor, so as not to be seen by Dido. Aelita and Hertz were sitting side-by-side at the teacher's desk.

Jeremy and Aelita had come prepared down to the last detail. They had checked that the Green Phoenix had no spy camera or microphone in the laboratory, and had then installed a cryptographic program onto the computer. Hertz and Aelita both had a microphone to talk to Dido, while the others could hear their dialogue thanks to speakers.

“It’s Thursday, one o’clock in the morning,” Jeremy commented, looking at his watch. “So in Washington it must be...”

“...seven in the afternoon, Wednesday,” Aelita concluded. Ulrich scratched his head, not really understanding.

“We’ve already studied time zones, Ulrich,” the professor groaned. “You should know how they work.”

The boy went as red as a tomato and Jeremy took advantage of the pause to complete the final adjustments on the computer.

“We’re ready,” he said. “Let’s hope that Dido is already in her office... Three, two, one... Call started!”

Aelita concentrated on the blank screen.

After several instants the image of a woman appeared. She was around Hertz’s age, with blonde hair and fine lips.

“Good morning, Dido,” the professor coldly greeted. “We are here with Walter Stern, who has explained to us how to get in contact with you.”

“I’m also very pleased to see you again, Major Steinback,” the woman said with a smile. “How long has it been since we last met? Eleven years? And that girl with you must be Hopper’s daughter. Strange that she’s still young. She should be over twenty years old by now.”

Aelita lowered her eyes, intimidated, but Hertz immediately intervened.

“We need to talk about some very important matters,” she said dryly.

The professor quickly brought Dido up to speed with recent events, up until the father-son meeting at the Hermitage and the invasion of the factory by Mago's men.

"These children," she finally said, "have proved themselves: they discovered Lyoko and fought X.A.N.A. all by themselves. But now, this is different... We need your help against the terrorists."

"Are you thinking of military intervention? The Parisian region has too many citizens. It could be complicated."

"No soldiers," Aelita interrupted, leaning towards the screen. "We want a peaceful solution. Listen, ma'am: my friends and I know the virtual worlds by heart and we're convinced that it's possible to stop the Green Phoenix through Lyoko. But to succeed, we'll need your co-operation. Walter's appearance at the Hermitage damaged the access scanner, blocking two of our friends in an isolated digital environment: my father's journal. We can't use the scanners at the factory, as they're currently out of reach. And let's not even think about the trinkets in Brussels, they're much too old for..."

"Ah yes, Brussels. You do realise you trespassed on government property, right, children? You could end up in prison."

"What we want," Aelita continued, not allowing herself to be intimidated, "is access to the information about the connection to the First City. That way, we can connect ourselves

directly to the replica, then the scanner, which we intend to build, without needing to go to Brussels.”

“That won’t be a problem,” Dido nodded. “What else?”  
Aelita smiled.

“Professor Hertz here has a dossier full of codes that we haven’t managed to decipher,” the professor jumped in her seat, but Aelita continued without pausing. “If we find out what they’re for...”

“I know what the codes are,” Hertz interrupted. “Waldo and I prepared them together not long ago. It’s the Code Down, the definitive weapon to destroy Lyoko and the First City once and for all.”

At that moment, Eva Skinner leapt up and ran out of the laboratory.

The girl began to move through the deserted hallway in huge strides. Walk to calm down: another human habit. She really had to do something to resolve this delicate situation.

At that moment, X.A.N.A. hated himself for not succeeding in possessing Professor Hertz. So these mysterious codes were to create a weapon capable of destroying Lyoko. In behaving like this, he ran the risk of being discovered, but he couldn’t contain his rage. Destroying the virtual world meant destroying him as well, and he could not allow that.

The children then came out of the laboratory. Jeremy and Aelita were holding hands and smiling.

“I’m sorry if I interrupted you,” Eva said, lowering her head. “I didn’t want to bother you, but it’s just that...I needed to go to the bathroom.”

“No problem,” Aelita responded. “The negotiations went very well. Dido is ready to give us a hand. As long as the Green Phoenix are in town, we’ll be allied with the men in black.”

“That’s correct,” Jeremy added. “Now, I also have the access codes to the First City. As soon as we build a new scanner you can go there, and get Yumi and Odd out of the Mirror.”

“And the Code Down?” Eva asked.

Hertz exited the laboratory adjusting her lab coat. She seemed very exhausted.

“It’s a long story, kids,” she commented. “We’ll talk about it tomorrow. For the moment, it’s time for bed.”

Everyone considered this a good idea and Eva was forced to give in. She had to wait longer. Plus, the prospect of entering the First City was more than sufficient to guarantee her a good night’s sleep.

*But you don’t sleep! You’re an artificial intelligence!*  
X.A.N.A. said to himself.

It was strange that, from time to time, he had to remind himself of something so basic.

Professor Hopper was in the Hermitage's attic. In reality, Yumi was also there in a corner, hidden there with Odd, still unconscious. But the man couldn't see them anyway.

The Mirror had brought the girl further forward in time, and she now found herself on the 3rd of June, 1994.

It was the afternoon, and the warm light of summer entered through the window. The attic was jam-packed with books and papers. Hopper was hunched over a large desk, scrawling notes and grumbling to himself.

At a certain point, he stood up and violently slammed his palm into the table.

"It doesn't work!" he cried. "The Code Down is still incomplete. Too many variables are getting away from me!"

He began to pace back and forth across the attic. He arrived at the window, from which Kadic Academy's park could be seen, and then retraced his steps to almost trample Yumi, seated on the floor, head between her knees.

"I need space on my disk to register the backup. Too much space, darn it! Where am I going to find such a powerful memory system? It would need to be able to conserve my data for a very long time..."

The professor started to walk again. Yumi turned her gaze from him to study the navigation system control box. She had escaped X.A.N.A.'s claws for the moment, but she wasn't sure that she was totally safe. Maybe X.A.N.A. really was able to use the Lyoko inside the Mirror to enter the Lyoko of the present. What had he said about the box? It was an interface

that allowed one to interact with the virtual world. And all he had needed was the power of his own thoughts in order to directly use machines.

Yumi knew that she had to warn the others, to get back in contact with reality. But she didn't know how to do it.

She pressed her ear, as if she were wearing an earpiece that didn't really exist.

"Jeremy...?" she murmured. "Can you hear me? Anyone?"

"I'm here!" Aelita's voice responded.

Yumi leapt to her feet, looking all around her like mad, and saw her friend enter the attic. She was dressed in her usual dungarees, her hair cut short and wearing a magnificent smile on her face.

Yumi ran towards her, brimming with happiness, and wrapped her arms around her. It was like trying to grab air. She passed straight through her, lost her balance and fell to the floor. She whipped around and saw the girl greet her father by kissing him on the cheek.

Oh, no, it wasn't the real Aelita. It was just a recording in the Mirror. Just like Hopper.

"Is everything going well, Daddy?" the young girl asked.

"No, not at all. There's a problem in my program that I can't isolate. What's more, I have disk space problems, and..."

"Can you tell me what's going on?" Aelita interrupted, observing him. "Susan told me that Walter fired everyone: the Ishiyamas, Robert Della Robbia, Michel..."

All of a sudden, Yumi was paying strict attention. Did she say “Ishiyama”? Was Aelita talking about her parents?

“You need to trust me, my dear.”

“Oh, that goes without saying. But, aside from that, can I help you with anything?”

Hopper observed her intensely.

“Perhaps you can. But I don’t know if it’s a good idea. I mean, I don’t know what kind of effect it will have on you.”

Aelita gave him another kiss.

“If you need me, you can count on me, Daddy. No matter the cost.”

“Ok, maybe it can work,” Hopper said with a smile.

Jeremy cleaned his greasy hands by briskly rubbing them against his jeans and placed the screwdriver on the floor.

“Hm...”

He and Professor Hertz were in the secret room in the Hermitage. They had got up very early in the morning and had come to the chalet together to immediately set to work on the scanner.

It was a Thursday and Jeremy needed to be in class, but Hertz had spoken to the principal, so he and his friends had been excused from classes for two days with the excuse of “helping the professor organise the science textbooks in the laboratory.”

The teen got out of the column and the professor gave him a glass of cold tea that he downed in one gulp. He wasn't used to physical work and was drenched in sweat.

He had changed the fuses but it hadn't been enough. Something mechanical had broken in the arm of the transformer, and, as if that wasn't enough, the motherboard had been toasted. When the current spiked, the scanner was working at full power, and the unexpected interruption had destroyed a delicate component.

Hertz attentively listened to his technical explanations and Jeremy smiled. It was very nice to be able to talk to the professor on equal terms. He finally faced someone who truly understood the technological problems he normally had to resolve alone.

"Maybe with the right equipment, I could repair the arm..." he finally added.

"...but not the motherboard," Hertz completed his sentence for him. "We need to replace it completely."

"If we can reach the old factory on the island, I could possibly find some replacement pieces Hopper abandoned there. But with the Green Phoenix terrorists around, it's much too dangerous. Odd and Yumi run the risk of being imprisoned in the Mirror forever."

"Unless..." the professor began to say as her mouth curled into a cunning smile, "we go to see the creators of the scanner directly."

“Exactly! It’s a shame Professor Hopper isn’t here with us. If he were, the problem would be solved by now!”

“Jeremy Belpois, may I remind you that I am your teacher? You need to trust me. And, what’s more, I never said that Hopper was the one who constructed the logic circuits in the scanners.”

“If that’s the case, then who did? You?”

“No. Someone you know very well: your father. With Mister Ishiyama. We could get them here and then use my memory-snatching machine to give them their memories back.”

Ulrich opened his eyes and, for a moment, had the impression of not having slept at all. He looked around him, disoriented. He was still in his room, in the Kadic dormitories. On the other hand, Odd wasn’t the one in the bed opposite him, but rather an adult man still dressed in suit and tie. His father.

After the conversation with Dido, they were all too tired to think about another solution, so Hertz had suggested that he sleep in the dormitories, with his son.

Ulrich shook his head. A traitor and the son of a traitor. What a great duo.

The teen got out of bed, slipped his feet into a pair of slippers, and glanced at the alarm clock. It was already ten o’clock in the morning. He hadn’t even heard the bell signal-

ling students to go to class. He decided he should go see if Jeremy and the others were already up...

“Son...” Walter murmured.

“Yes?”

“You’re already up?”

“I’m hungry. It’s past breakfast time.”

His father sat up on the bed. His dark suit had been completely crinkled during the night, and a short and shaggy beard had appeared on the man’s cheeks.

“I’m sorry.”

“Why are you telling me you’re sorry?” Ulrich rattled, giving him a perplexed look.

“For what I did to you, you and your mother. I don’t know if I’ve ever been a good father, and I’m sorry for that. I...”

“Come on,” the young boy interrupted, forcing a smile, “it’s not that bad...”

“That’s not true. But I want to tell you that I’m very angry at myself. I played a very dangerous game and I lost everything. I had the opportunity to change my life after they erased my memory, compensate in some way for what I had done... And instead of that, I continued to open the old wounds of my errors. During all that time, I distanced you from me, without listening or really talking to you. I was even close to losing your mother’s love. But when I saw you in the Hermitage yesterday, I finally understood everything. I feel that I’ve changed. And now, I can make up for all the bad I’ve caused, being with you and helping Aelita,” Walter stopped

and, for the first time since he began speaking, he looked Ulrich in the eyes. Ulrich tried to smile back. “What do you say? Are you willing to give me another chance?”

The young man approached him, holding out his hand.

“We have a lot to work on and it will be very dangerous. We’re really going to need you to make it out of all this.”

Father and son exchanged a strong handshake.

“Do you have a moment?” Jeremy asked.

Aelita was in Professor Hertz’s office. She had retrieved the dossier of codes that they hadn’t yet managed to make sense of and, perched on a tower of magazines, was contemplating the sheaf of papers in her hands without blinking. She didn’t even raise her head to greet Jeremy when he sat beside her.

He happily explained to her that Hertz telephoned everyone’s parents. Given that Jeremy’s lived in a city far away, the meeting would take place the following day. When they arrive, the professor will bring back their memories and put them to work together on the scanner. At first, the principal had some objections, especially about the idea of giving the children two days of “holiday,” but in the end Hertz managed to win him over. Yumi and Odd were still prisoners in the virtual world and they had a lot of work ahead of them.

“We’ve almost done it,” Jeremy concluded, giving his friend a warm smile. “Soon, you’ll also be able to enter the Mirror.”

Aelita seemed pensive, completely absorbed in the papers.

“Hey, are you listening?”

“I still can’t understand it...” the girl murmured. “This program... It’s incomplete, that’s why Hertz never used it until now. It’s missing some chunks.”

Jeremy leaned in to look at the pages. Indeed, Aelita could have been right. But, to be sure, they had to thoroughly study these pages and do some simulations on the computer.

“Well,” he said, “it seems obvious that it’s missing some parts. We also have to take Richard’s palm-computer into account, and there’s also the Mirror as well. And the First City. It’s likely that your father dispersed several fragments of the program throughout the various virtual worlds.”

Aelita shook her head. She picked up another sheaf of papers from the floor.

“Here. Richard printed me the codes that appeared on his palm-computer. If you look at them carefully, you can see that they have nothing to do with the Code Down. It’s like a completely different program.”

“Hm...”

The girl smiled. There was something more.

“In my memories, I had a sort of flashback, a fragment in which I seemed to be in the Hermitage with my father, and he asked me to help him do something important... But I can’t remember what it was.”

“Well,” Jeremy consoled her, “I wouldn’t worry about that if I were you. Since you lost your memory during the Christmas holidays, your memories have been a confused mess. But you reclaim more each day that passes.”

“This is different,” Aelita retorted, shaking her head. “Even if I can’t remember why.”

# 8

## SOLDIERS IN THE VIRTUAL WORLD



The first underground floor of the factory housed the control system of the Supercomputer.

Hannibal Mago entered the broad room, illuminated by a greenish light which came directly from the walls. At the centre, there was a circular platform that a mess of mechanical arms and electrical cables hung from. Between the platform and the devices overhead floated a sphere that seemed similar to a small planet divided into four differently-coloured sections. At the centre of the sphere shone a very vivid, white-coloured core.

Mago stopped to admire this nearly transparent world that was suspended in air.

“That’s Lyoko then?” he asked.

Memory sat on a very comfortable chair that had a series of buttons on the arms, pivoting a short distance from the platform and surrounded by an imposing console composed of buttons, screens and levers. The woman was busy with the computer commands, but she turned as soon as she heard her boss’s voice.

“Yes, it’s a projection of Lyoko. From here, I can control all of Lyoko, manage its towers...and especially, see where our men are located.”

Mago approached her and started to study the hologram of Lyoko. One of its quarters, the one in green, had a bright rectangular label superimposed over it, on which three-dimensional letters read, *LYOKO FOREST*. On the surface of the green quarter were three red, immobile icons. Memory pointed at them.

“These three icons here indicate the position of our unit.”

“And why aren’t they moving?” asked the man with a weary voice.

“I haven’t the slightest idea,” Memory admitted. “There should be a way to communicate with them. But perhaps I haven’t yet figured out how to activate the microphone. I tried to talk to them, but they didn’t hear me.”

“Zoom in,” Mago said.

“I can do even better.”

The woman's fingers began to hammer at the keyboard. One of the monitors went dark, then lit up again, showing a new image.

It appeared to be a scene from a video game. The sky was a shade of light blue, although there was no sun or clouds to be seen. The ground was solid, flat and green, which was supposed to resemble grass in theory, and there were several tall trees with narrow trunks. They were possibly birch trees, but the trunks were too straight and smooth, and they rose so high into the sky that their tops could not be seen. There was no such tree in the real world.

"It's a static image?" Mago asked.

"No, it's a video. It shows exactly what..." Memory glanced at another screen, "...the soldier Kalam is seeing."

"But they aren't moving. Why?"

"I was convinced that the lack of audio was to blame..." said the woman, shrugging her shoulders. "That they were waiting for our orders."

"No one can remain still for this long! They haven't even turned their heads. Bring them in immediately. Something must have happened to them!"

Memory obeyed.

The attic of the Hermitage began to grow dark. Orange evening light entered through the windows as the sun set. It was the sunset of the 3rd of June, 1994, to be precise.

Yumi sighed. How many hours had she been trapped in the Mirror? Hopper and Aelita, or rather, their recordings, had been away from the attic for a very long time, but she had decided not to follow them.

Discovering the content of the professor's journal didn't interest her anymore. She only wanted to go back home to warn the others that X.A.N.A. was alive.

At the young girl's feet, Odd was still asleep on his side with his mouth hanging open, his chest barely moving.

"Can't you wake up?" Yumi whispered to him softly, touching his shoulder. "You don't know how much I need you." She waited a moment, and when nothing happened, she shook him with all her might. "Wake up, Odd, please! I'm serious."

"Huh?" responded the boy, opening one eye, then the other. He sensitively placed his head between his hands, as if he feared that it might explode.

"I feel like a steamroller ran over my..."

He couldn't finish his sentence. Yumi fell to her knees and gave him a bear hug. Tears of joy fell down her cheeks. She was no longer alone!

"Hey, not so tight," muttered Odd. "You're suffocating me..."

The boy sat up straight and looked all around himself with curiosity.

"Where are we? At the Hermitage? It's really hot for January..."

“Mhm. Actually, it’s June. The 3rd of June, 1994.”

“Whoa, that’s crazy! Mad scientist Jeremy managed to build a time-travel machine like in that movie, *Back to the Future*? If he used a car, I hope he used the right race car, like a Ferrari or a Porsche or...”

Yumi burst out laughing and placed a hand on his mouth to keep him quiet. This was truly the Odd she’d always known. He never missed the chance to crack a joke!

The young girl filled him in on the situation, telling him about the Mirror and the discoveries that she had made about Hopper and Aelita’s past. And then, she told him about the most terrible discovery of them all: X.A.N.A.

“I remember now! Eva Skinner!” Odd burst out, somehow managing to stay silent up until then. “I went to go see her at her house, and she was X.A.N.A. She kissed me and... Everything became muddled after that.”

“Eva? X.A.N.A. possessed her too? Then we have a really big problem. It’s been at least a day since I last managed to contact Jeremy. We can’t even warn him of the danger!”

“You’ll see, they can take care of themselves,” Odd assured her with a smile. “I’m more worried about something else. I didn’t fully explain myself. I went to see Eva because I found a strange memory card. The man with the dogs dropped it when he attacked my father. It had a video saved on it showing Aelita’s mother. She was tied to a chair, being held prisoner!”

“I don’t know what to think anymore. You want to know something else strange? Your father and my parents... Hopper knew them! I heard him talking about them with Aelita several hours ago, well, several hours ago in the June of 1994. How can that be?”

There were more mysterious elements to this story with every discovery.

“Though personally, I think it’s up to us to solve the most important problem...” said Odd looking all around himself, worriedly.

“X.A.N.A.?”

“No,” he responded in a very serious tone of voice. “Food. It’s been ages since I last ate.”

Yumi felt her stomach contort. It was true; she hadn’t had anything to eat either since she entered the Mirror. Although, they obviously couldn’t eat anything here, could they? They were virtualised, and these weren’t their physical bodies, and...

“Let’s go find something to eat,” said Odd, getting up.

The doors of the scanner opened with a hum, and the soldier fell flat on his stomach. Two of his squad mates were ready to catch him, so that he would not hit his head hard from his fall.

Hannibal Mago observed him while the soldiers laid him on the ground and Memory leaned over him with a stethoscope to check his vital signs.

“This is the third man now that we sent to Lyoko,” noted Mago, “and his condition seems just as bad as the others’.”

Memory removed the stethoscope from her ears and nodded.

“Yes,” she confirmed. “He is still alive, but he’s in a state of shock.”

“But why?”

The woman stood and managed a shy smile. Mago immediately understood and motioned for her to follow him. They both returned to the lift and headed up to the ground floor of the factory, then entered the nomadic tent. Once there, Mago removed his shoes and dropped them onto the soft cushions. He picked up a silver teapot that was spouting a fine stream of clear, aromatic vapour. The waiter had been diligent. At five o’clock on the dot, his tea was there. Hannibal served himself a cup and savoured the bitter liquid. He didn’t ask Memory if she would like some. He left her waiting there, standing around.

“What happened to him?” he said several moments later, waving his hand.

“I believe that it’s due to the virtualisation scanners,” the woman replied. “When a human being is virtualised, their body completely disintegrates, and the computer takes the data and reconstructs it onto Lyoko.”

“Get to the point,” ordered Mago; these technical details didn’t interest him one bit.

“At the time that the body is reconstructed in the virtual world, the computer doesn’t base it on the physical structure of the real body, but instead uses the person’s subconscious image of their own self. To put it shortly, on Lyoko, everyone takes on the characteristics that correspond with the feelings they have about themselves and how they see themselves. In a sense, on Lyoko, everyone finds their true form, which is very different than that of the one on our world.”

Mago finished his tea.

“I completed several analyses,” Memory continued to explain. “On the images of Lyoko that I took through the eyes of our soldiers. They had all acquired monstrous appearances. One, for example, was transformed into an immense spider, and another was a child that seemed completely lost and was covered in a yellow substance that seemed like...vomit.”

“Gross,” Mago commented, gasping in disgust. “It doesn’t surprise me that they were in a state of shock.”

“Yes. It’s difficult for us to face our greatest fears and accept the vision that we have of ourselves. These soldiers have dirtied their hands in all sorts of crime. And when Lyoko forces them to look reality in the face, they crumble and become immobilised.”

“And they become completely useless!” cried the leader of the Green Phoenix, standing up from his cushions and starting to pace back and forth.

He needed his men to enter the fifth sector, the core of Lyoko, and to open the passage that would connect him to

the First City. But how could they succeed if they became totally paralysed the moment they set foot in the virtual world?

“With a bit of luck,” Mago murmured. “Another unit might have a better chance.”

“I... No...” said Memory, looking at him unsteadily. “I don’t think that would...”

“Try it. Send another group of soldiers to Lyoko to see what happens. If that doesn’t work, continue experimenting. Maybe you’ll come up with a useful idea.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I want a detailed report tomorrow morning. And tell Gregory Nictapolis to be present. We must find a solution to this problem.”

Memory left the tent, giving a slight bow, leaving Mago alone again, staring fixedly at the large, emerald tapestry. He hated this factory. It reeked of dust and grime. In no way was this appropriate accommodation for someone of his class.

“I feel human again,” said Odd, wiping his mouth with one of his catboy sleeves.

Yumi studied him with a scrutinising look.

“The truth is, when you eat, you become a real animal. You totally emptied out Hopper’s fridge.”

“Hopper’s fridge...from 1994! I promise you he won’t even notice.”

The young boy stood up from the table and opened the door to the enormous fridge that took up much of the space in the Hermitage's kitchen. Yumi's eyes opened wide. All while holding the control box in one hand, Odd was able to eat half a cold chicken, a ham and cheese sandwich, leftover lasagne and a slice of pie. Yet all of this food remained in its original place: the chicken, enveloped in transparent plastic wrap; the lasagne, on its plate. Everything remained as perfect as if it had never been touched. It was incredible.

"See?" Odd told her, winking. "And check out the table!"

Now that the boy was no longer touching the meat, the dirty dishes and the wrinkled napkins became transparent.

"Tada!" said Odd with a chuckle. "This box is fantastic! A lot better than washing dishes."

"It's just like X.A.N.A. said," noted Yumi. "The Mirror's navigation box allows us to touch and use any of the objects we see, but nothing can be modified in this world. There's nothing real here. Everything's virtual."

"But the food is really good," commented her friend, rubbing his stomach. "Although, now that I think about it, it was ten years past the expiration date. I hope that won't upset my stomach."

Yumi continued to observe the table, from which the plates had already disappeared. Virtual or not, the food *was* really good. And the water too. She hadn't realised just how thirsty she was until she had drank almost an entire bottle.

“Alright!” she exclaimed. “Now that we’ve stuffed our faces, we need to decide what we’re going to do. We’re trapped in this fragment of the past, and we can’t warn the others that X.A.N.A. is free. And at the same time, that computerised monster could be in the process of destroying everything.”

“Exactly,” confirmed Odd. “Do you have a plan?”

“We could continue to press the fast forward button. The Mirror resembles a sort of DVD movie, so with a little bit of luck on our side, if we make it to the credits, the movie will end...”

“...and we’ll return to the real world. That’s cool with me.”

Odd approached her and took her hand.

“Hang on tight,” he ordered.

Then, he pressed the button.



JEREMY



Applications Places System



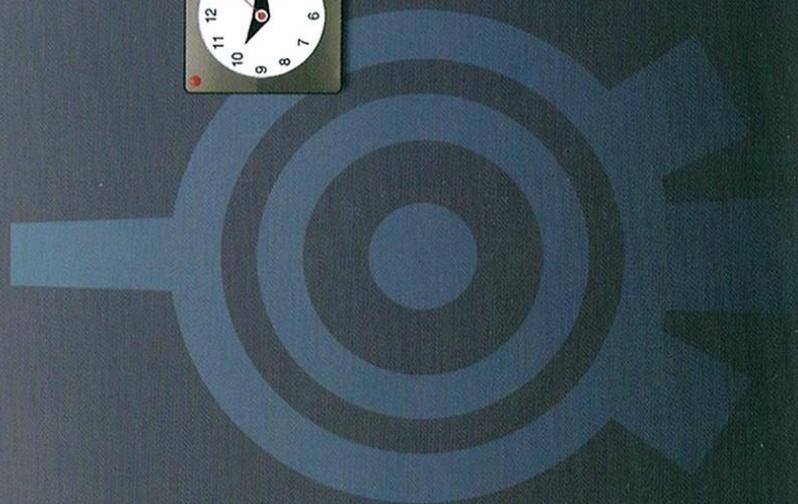
bsd1



bsd2



10:15 PM





Don't know what  
the... of...  
1896  
KADIC COLLEGE

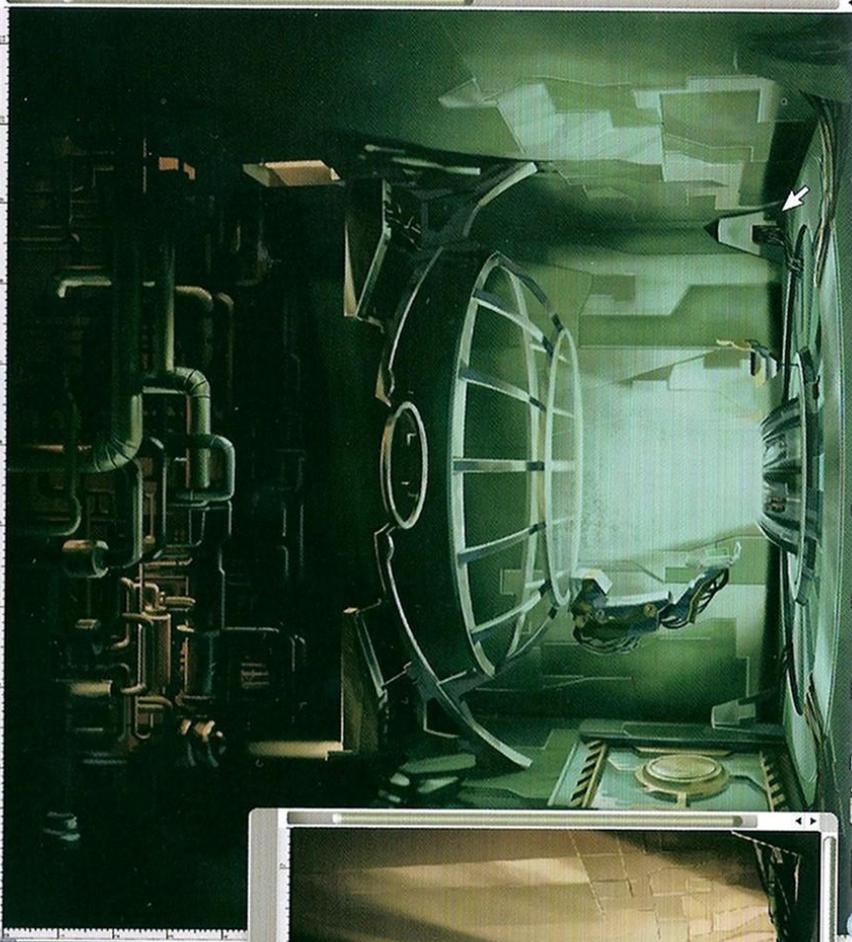
100%

Applications Places System



10:33 PM

SUPERCOMPUTER.JPG @ 100% (CMYK/8)



SCANNER.JPG @ 100% (CMYK/8)



**SUPERCOMPUTER.jpg:**

The computer found in the  
underground levels of the factory.

**SCANNER.jpg:**

Virtualisation chambers to  
reach the world of Lyoko.

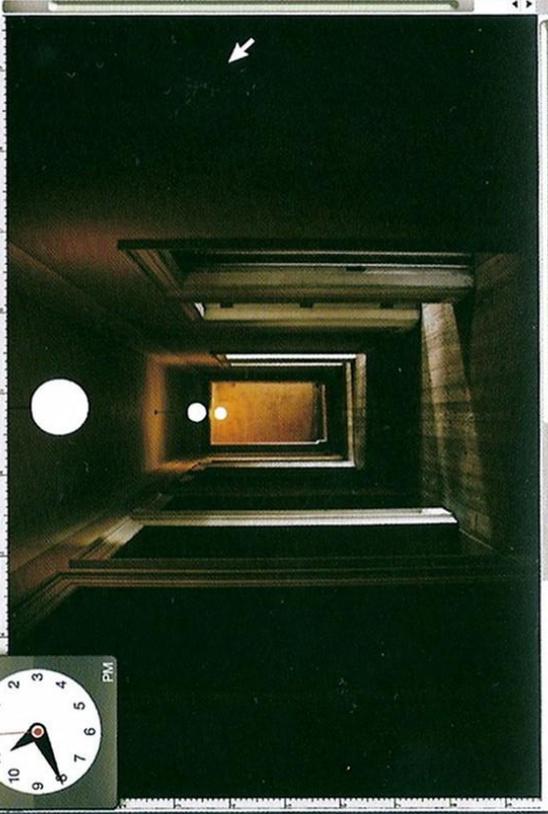


10:40 PM

BRUSSELS\_BUILDING.JPG @ 100% (CMYK/8)



TOP\_FLOOR.JPG @ 100% (CMYK/8)



hd:1  
hd:2



**BRUSSELS\_BUILDING.JPG:**

14 Rue Camille Lemonnier.

Address found in the Waldo  
Schaeffer file.

**TOP\_FLOOR.jpg:**

We found the replica on the  
eighth floor of this building.

Applications Places System



hsa1

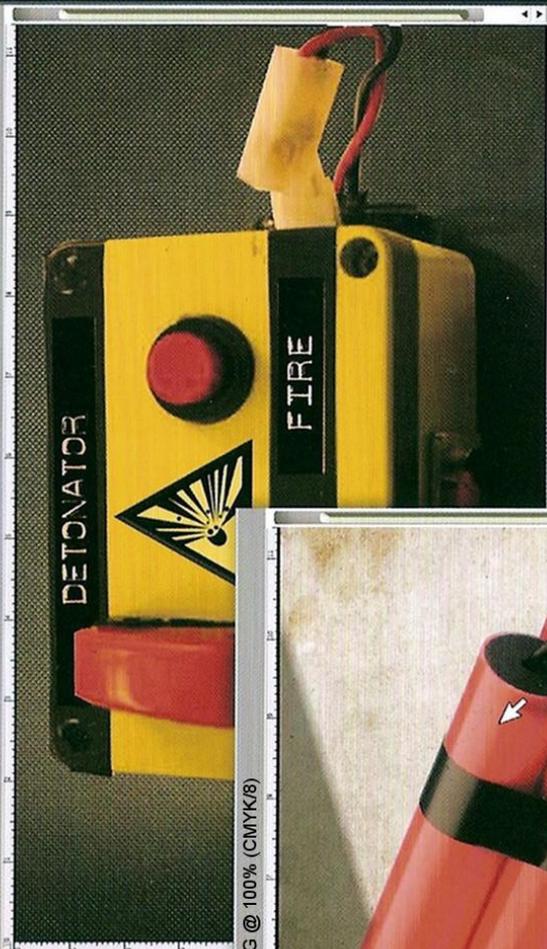


hsa2

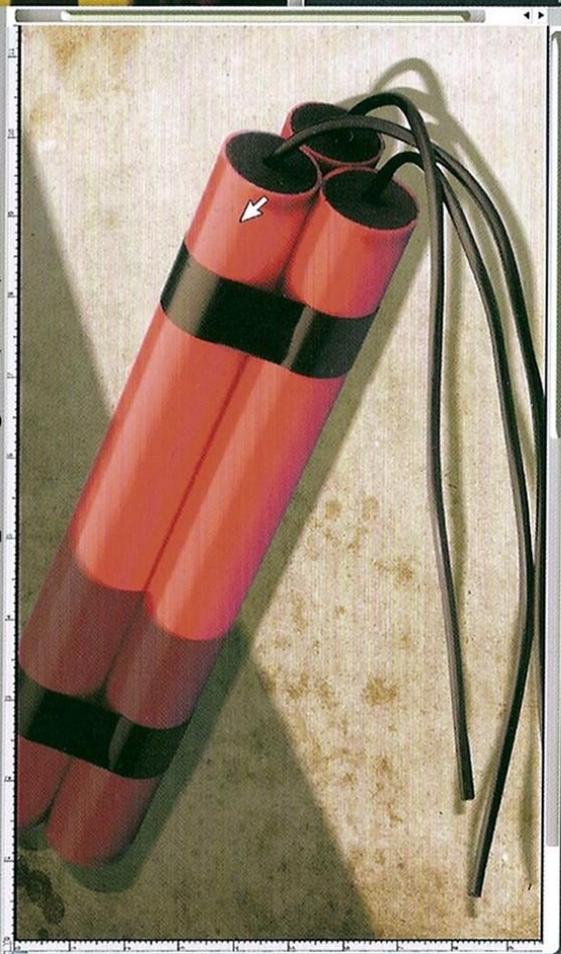


00:00 AM

DETONATOR.JPG @ 100% (CMYK/8)



HOMEMADE\_BOMB.JPG @ 100% (CMYK/8)



**HOMEMADE\_BOMB.jpg:**

**Professor Hertz  
constructed it in minutes.**

**DETONATOR.jpg:**

**Major Steinback was  
an explosives expert?**



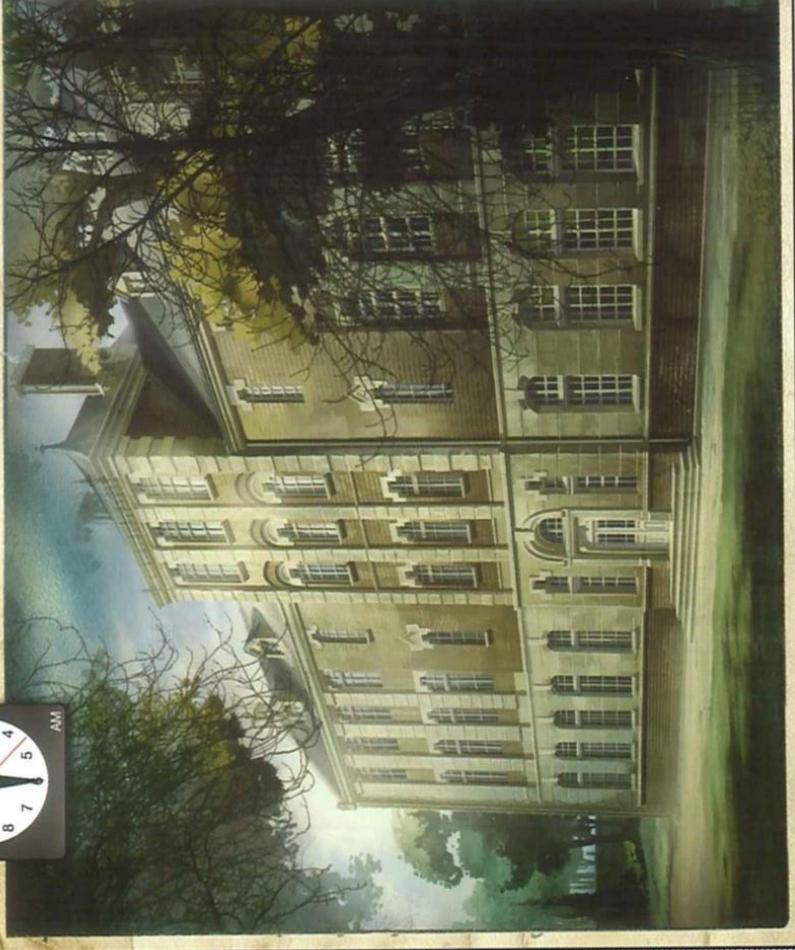
**CODDE AELITA**

00:30 AM

HOPPER\_AELITA.JPG @ 100%...



KADIC\_ACADEMY.JPG @ 100% (CMYK/8)



**HOPPER\_AELITA.jpg:**

**Professor Hopper and  
little Aelita.**

**KADIC\_ACADEMY.jpg:**

**Ten years ago, Franz Hopper  
was one of the teachers  
at our school.**

00:45 AM @

SEWER\_MANHOLE.JPG @ 100% (CMYK/8)



FACTORY.JPG @ 100% (CMYK/8)



**FACTORY.jpg:**

Hopper's secret laboratory.

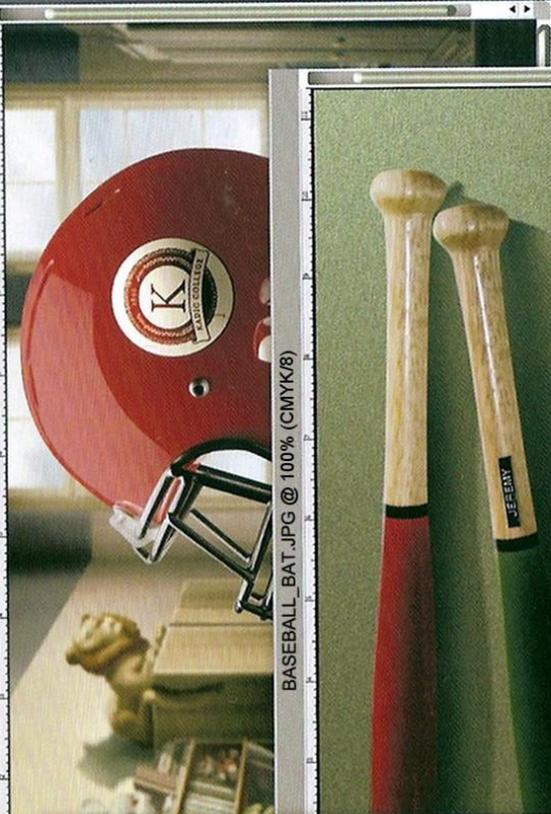
This is where everything began.

**SEWER\_MANHOLE.jpg:**

Our secret entrance to the  
underground levels of the factory.

01:10 AM

FOOTBALL\_HELMET.JPG @ 100% (CMYK/8)



BASEBALL\_BAT.JPG @ 100% (CMYK/8)



NUNCHAKU.JPG @ 100%...



msd1  
msd2



**NUNCHAKU.jpg:**

One of Ulrich's weapons.

**FOOTBALL\_HELMET.jpg:**

Anything is useful...

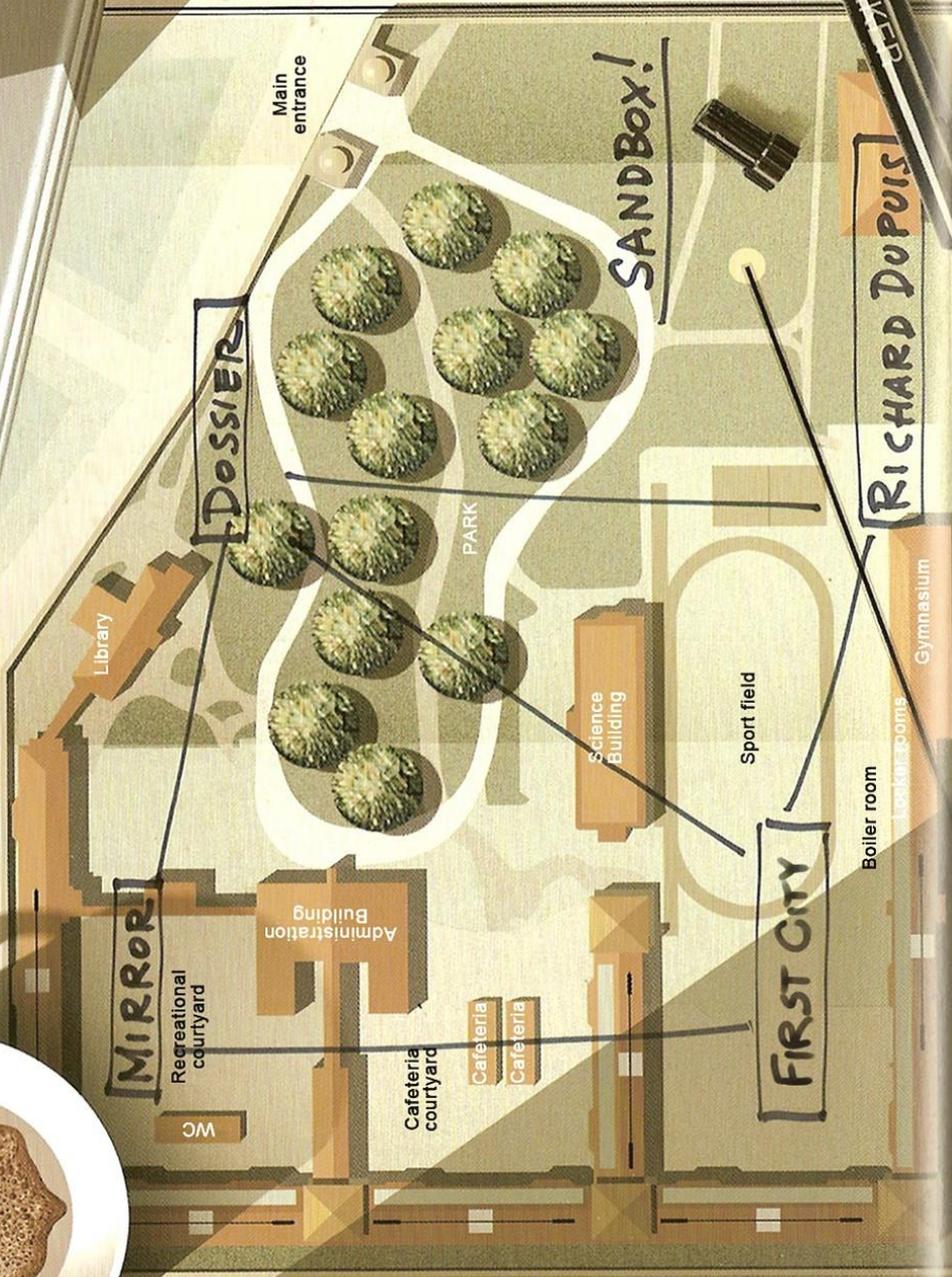
**BASEBALL\_BAT.jpg:**

...for defending Kadic.

EPUIKA

SCHOOL MAP

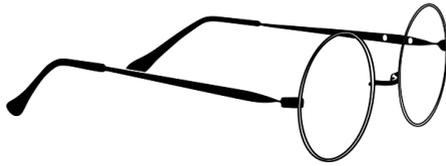
-  Dirt path
-  Cement path
-  Sport field
-  Grass
-  Park
-  Buildings
-  Archways
-  Long Staircases
-  Classrooms on 1st  
Dorm rooms on 2nd  
Attic on 3rd
-  Tunnel Entrance
-  Tunnel



Secondary entrance

# 9

## THE MIRROR'S END



Friday morning began with a timid sun and humid, cold and thick air. Trees in the park shone with dewdrops. It was as if an army of fireflies were hidden among the bare branches.

Jim Morales sneezed and blew his nose.

“I don’t understand why it has to be me specifically.”

“Because Professor Hertz asked you to,” Jeremy replied.

The boy observed the sports teacher and sneered to himself. Jim was a robust man who was far younger than the rest of the teaching staff, to the point that the students almost considered him as one of them and referred to him by first name. He had crew-cut hair and always wore a ridiculous adhesive bandage on his cheek that, in his opinion, gave him a tough-guy look. And on that day, he also had a red nose due to the chill.

“Ok, ok,” he insisted, “but why did your parents have to come here on precisely this day? And all together as well?”

And why are Aelita, you and your little group of friends not in class, like everyone else?"

"Hertz explained the situation to you, didn't she?"

"Yes," Jim admitted, "but to tell the truth, I didn't really understand much of it."

Jeremy gave him a friendly pat on the shoulder and they both arrived at Kadic's gate, where the kids' parents were waiting for them.

Takeho and Akiko Ishiyama, Yumi's father and mother, who live in an area nearby, came on foot. Odd's parents, Robert and Marguerite, quickly joined them. The Ishiyamas and Robert had the same lost, confused expression on their faces. It was because of the man with two dogs, who Walter Stern had called Grigory Nictapolus. According to Hertz, this despicable man had used the memory-snatching machine on them.

Jeremy looked all around him until he spotted who he was looking for. He was there, a little further away from the others and seated on the edge of the footpath just the other side of the gate: his father, Michel Belpois. He was a tall and skinny man with blond hair, which was becoming sparser around his ears, and disappearing completely on the top of his head. He was dressed in a tweed suit like that of an English teacher from a previous decade, and round glasses identical to his son's sat upon his nose.

"Dad!" Jeremy cried as he ran towards him. "How are you?"

“Good. Your mother told me to send you a kiss and an enormous hug. But you...are you up to something? Why aren't you in class?”

“Ahem...” Jeremy cleared his throat, giving him a surprised look. “What did Professor Hertz tell you?”

“That I needed to come here as soon as possible,” he responded before gesturing to the rest of the parents with his head. “And I see that I'm not the only one.”

During this time, Jim had approached them, trying to be kind. The Ishiyamas and Robert Della Robbia's faces hadn't changed expression after hearing his jokes, while Odd's mother even seemed upset.

Jeremy decided to take matters into his own hands.

“Come on,” he exclaimed, “Professor Hertz is waiting for you. We'll have time to talk later.”

The darn factory didn't even have running water.

Throughout his life, Mago hadn't really been a very privileged person: he came from a very poor family, and to be able to survive, he had needed to enlist in the army as soon as he came of age. But this place was truly intolerable. In comparison, some military bases in Eastern Europe seemed like five-star hotels.

“Excuse me, sir, may we enter?” Memory's voice asked from outside the tent.

The man finished washing his face with water from the dish and glanced in the mirror. His hair had been well-

combed, and his golden canine teeth gave him a wolf-like appearance. Or vampire-like.

"Come in, come in," he said after fixing his purple hat on his head.

Memory and Grigory Nictapulus obeyed.

"Well?" Mago asked them as he sat down comfortably on the cushions. "Any news?"

"For the moment we've sent twenty-two of our best soldiers to Lyoko," Memory began to explain. "None of them have managed to take even a single step. Except for one." Mago raised an eyebrow, suddenly interested, and Memory continued. "He's soldier James Farreland, sir. Just after materialisation on Lyoko, he began to run as fast as he could, terrified. Getting him out of the virtual world was quite a feat. I'm afraid that he may never recover."

"In other words, nothing, a total failure," Mago said, his mouth twisted in a dissatisfied expression.

"Yes, sir. As I've already told you, it's not possible for adults to enter Lyoko."

"But some people have succeeded, sir," Grigory interrupted. He had an intense look in his eyes, one that was dark and lifeless, like a predator. "Like those brats, for example. And one adult: Professor Hopper."

"Are you sure?"

"I revised all my recordings and the data from the file. Apparently, Hopper went to Lyoko with his daughter, Aelita... and he never came back."

“Great, fantastic,” Mago commented sarcastically.

“Hopper is a peculiar person,” Memory added. “After all, he is the creator of Lyoko. And, what’s more, we have no idea what effects virtualisation had on him...”

Hannibal Mago slammed his fist into the coffee table beside him, and his rings jingled menacingly.

“So in short, our only way to enter Lyoko is to resort to using a peculiar person. Or a child, is that it?” he grouched, then turned towards Memory with an inquisitive look. “You, my friend, you are undoubtedly very special...”

The woman didn’t even flinch, and Mago smiled. Excellent, Memory’s loyalty was absolute. At least the money he gave Walter Stern for the memory-snatching machine had been a good investment.

“If you’ll allow me, sir, I wouldn’t recommend that.” Grigory intervened, shaking his head. “Memory is the only one who knows how to operate the supercomputer. If what happened to the rest of our soldiers happens to her as well, we won’t stand a chance.”

“Hm, that’s true,” he admitted with a look of disappointment.

“On the other hand,” Grigory continued, “the children are dispensable. I’m thinking of Jeremy Belpois, for example, the boss of the little gang. He would be perfect. It wouldn’t be difficult to convince him to work with us.”

Grigory could have really ingenious ideas sometimes.

“So be it,” said Mago, rising to his feet. “Bring me this Jeremy.”

“Yes, sir. I will go tonight.”

Jeremy waited alone in front of Professor Hertz's office. The recuperation procedure had been carried out without any problems, and Yumi and Odd's parents had regained their memory before going to the dormitory with the rest of the kids. They had much to discuss.

But Jeremy had preferred not to go with them. At this very moment Hertz was using the memory-snatching machine on his father.

The boy had helped the teacher install the apparatus that very morning. It was a simple pair of leather gloves with metallic sensors on the fingertips that were connected to an LCD monitor on the back, along with a potentiometer, the device that allowed the user to control the machine's intensity. The potentiometer was also connected via Bluetooth to a large computer that analysed the person's brain and recorded their memories. Or gave them back, like what was happening now.

The office door then opened, and Professor Hertz exited into the hallway, accompanying Michel Belpois, who was holding her arm.

“How do you feel, Dad?” Jeremy gushed, jumping to his feet.

“I have a bit of a headache.”

The professor helped the man to sit in the chair Jeremy was just occupying.

“It’ll pass,” his son assured him.

Michel nodded silently and raised a hand to caress his head.

“I always knew you had so much worth. But now that I have my memories back, Susan...that is, Professor Hertz, brought me up to date. You’ve really proved yourself, like a real champion.”

Jeremy coughed, blushing, and cleaned his glasses on his shirt so nobody would notice he was close to blubbering.

“You’ve also been great, Dad,” he murmured. “The professor told me that you were one of the people who invented the scanners.”

“Yes, the scanners. It seems strange to me now, to not have thought about it for all these years. They disappeared from my mind. They were completely erased. But now, I remember everything,” Michel looked at his son and winked. “And it’s more than about time to get back to work, the both of us, isn’t it?”

Yumi and Odd were in the living room of the Hermitage.

Aelita was lying on the couch, and seemed ill. She was drenched in sweat, seemed exhausted, and had a wet cloth on her forehead. Hopper was working by her side with a laptop on his knees.

“Aelita!” Odd exclaimed. “So we’re not completely alone.”

Yumi looked at him and gave a sad smile.

“Unfortunately, it’s not what it seems. In this world, Aelita is just a recording. Look closely: she looks human, not elven like she usually does on Lyoko.

Yumi took the control box and looked at the small screen: *1 June 1994*. They had arrived on the final day for Aelita and her father before their long voyage within Lyoko. The girl would not come out of the supercomputer for several years, and Hopper never would. In a way, it was the last day of their lives.

Aelita turned the cloth over on her forehead. Her cheeks were coloured an intense red that matched her flamboyant hair.

“How are you feeling?” her father asked her.

“I have a really bad headache,” she murmured.

“That’s because of the memory-snatching machine,” Hopper said, turning his gaze away from the laptop and smiling at her. “I’ve never used it in the opposite way before. You’ll see, it’ll wear off soon.”

“The memory-snatching machine?” Odd whispered, but Yumi gestured for him to be quiet. Maybe they would find out about it later.

“And the secret room?” Aelita asked, seeming concerned. “Is everything ready?”

“Yes,” Hopper assured her. “I did everything like we said. The Broulet brothers built the walls that hide the first room

as well as the second one. It's very unlikely that anyone will become aware of their existence."

"Can I tell you something? I'm afraid of forgetting everything. Since you used the machine, I've felt very strange, as if parts of my memory are dying to leave me. I'm scared."

Hopper held her tenderly.

"Don't worry. I left a video in the room. And you have my notebook in the attic. I drew a map in invisible ink inside it, showing you how to enter. That way, you can always find the secret room again, if need be."

"A video? So you also think that...you think that I could forget everything?" his daughter asked, visibly worried.

Hopper looked away from her. Yumi immediately noticed the dark shadow of concern that overtook his gaze.

So, it was true, Hopper really had done something to Aelita, something that caused her memory loss! So that was how she'd forgotten everything; from the secret room to the fact that she knew Yumi and the others' parents very well!

The young girl could now explain the sad tone of voice the professor had in the video in the secret room. He knew perfectly well that when Aelita saw it, she would be a completely different person, without the slightest memory of any of this.

"I promise that everything will be ok," Hopper whispered. "I'm sure of it."

At that moment, someone knocked loudly at the front door.

“Professor, we know you’re in there!” someone shouted from outside. “Come out with your hands in the air and don’t try to resist!”

Yumi instinctively stood up and ran to look through the living room window. Standing on the Hermitage’s front porch were three men completely dressed in black: suits, ties, sunglasses...and with guns in hand.

“They’re the same ones that chased me and Ulrich around Brussels!” Yumi cried, raising her hands to her mouth.

“So things are about to get ugly,” Odd announced. “Look, Hopper knows it too.”

The professor had stood up and was trembling. His eyes darted all around him looking lost, and then he ran into the kitchen. When he came out a moment later, he was holding a pistol in his hands.

Aelita scrutinised it, eyes wide.

“Daddy! What are you going to do?”

“Susan left it in case we ran into any problems,” Hopper replied to his daughter, forcing a smile. “But don’t worry, I have no intention of using it.”

Yumi and Odd shared a worried glance.

“Professor! Come out of the house with your hands up! Don’t make us come in there!”

Hopper gripped the pistol and pointed it towards the door.

“I’m armed!” he screamed. “If you enter, I’ll fire! GET OUT OF HERE!”

Yumi squatted out of instinct, causing Odd to do the same.

“He’s terrified,” she whispered. “Things could get out of hand.”

The men in black began to shout again from behind the door. Hopper seized Aelita’s hand, trying to get her up from the couch, but the girl was too weak. She remained seated, breathless, and her head fell back against the back of the seat in a chaotic cascade of red hair.

“This is your final warning, Professor!” the men in black cried. “Let us in!”

Hopper looked around him, not really knowing what to do or where to go. His forehead and hair were beaded with large drops of sweat. Then, the sound of glass shattering broke the silence.

A black-covered elbow had broken part of the glass in the window, sending a transparent rain onto the floor. A hand then stuck itself into the room. It was wearing a dark glove. And holding a gun.

Yumi couldn’t move. It was such a crazy scene, so different from her normal life, that the girl couldn’t believe that it had actually happened.

The professor let out a cry, aghast, and the weapon almost slipped out of his hand. There was a gunshot. Hopper dropped the smoking weapon, horrified.

“He shot! Return fire!”

The weapon in the window began to shoot.

A thin blaze drew a line straight between the shadows, and a fraction of a second later, Yumi heard Aelita's cry.

The girl whipped around and suddenly felt like she was moving in slow motion: her friend's hair was whipped as if disturbed by a light breeze, and a trail of blood began to drip down her forehead.

"They...they shot her!" Odd murmured, stammering. "They shot Aelita!"

Hopper stifled a cry of despair upon seeing his daughter collapse on the floor. He ran to her and took her in his arms. He then dashed out of the room, running as fast as he could.

Yumi and Odd hurried to follow Hopper through the main hallway and down the stairs to the underground. Behind them, the men in black broke down the door.

"You just need to hang on for a few more minutes, my dear. Then, we'll be safe," Hopper whispered to his daughter. The professor ignored the cold room and continued to the metal door leading to the secret passage to the factory.

"They...they'll find us..." Aelita said to her father.

"Don't worry," he said with a fragile smile. "It's not easy to find the right way down here. And once on Lyoko, your body will be dematerialised, and this head wound will be healed like magic. Trust me."

Yumi and Odd followed them inside the passage, and finally entered the sewers.

"What will happen to Aelita?" Odd asked anxiously.

“We don’t have to worry about that,” Yumi smiled. “In the present, she’s still alive and in perfect health, right? That means that she survived, that Hopper managed to virtualise her onto Lyoko in time.” After finishing her reasoning, the girl reflected for a moment and continued. “On the other hand, there is something that worries me. We’re following Hopper. And he’s already sealed the secret room, and is ready to escape to Lyoko forever...”

“Yes. And?”

“And, if these are his memories, how can we see them? The recording in the Mirror should have finished at least two days ago. There’s something strange about all this.”

Odd shrugged.

“You said that we’re in a sandmachinethingy inside the supercomputer at the factory, right?”

“Sandbox,” Yumi nodded. “Yes, Jeremy called it that.”

“So maybe Hopper recorded his memories directly into the supercomputer.”

Ulrich let out a mocking laugh and slapped Jeremy’s shoulder.

“You know what?” he said. “Now I know where you get it from.”

“Meaning?”

He and his father were side by side, the same glasses a twisted shape on their noses and with the same grease stains on their clothes.

“Nothing, man, nothing...” Ulrich avoided giving the response, laughing again quietly.

Eva and Richard then arrived, holding a platter of glasses and a jar of lemonade. The teen told them in a satisfied voice that the repairs on the mechanical arm were almost finished. According to Mister Ishiyama, they would finish it at around six in the afternoon.

Jeremy and his father sat down on the small sofa in the secret room in the Hermitage, facing the old television in which Hopper had left his video for Aelita.

The boy looked at his watch. It was half past two. It seemed incredible that Odd’s father and Yumi’s parents had sped up the repairs so much. They must have rebuilt their old friendship while at work.

“The only problem is that, with the motherboard melted,” he murmured, “we need to build another one. That could take us months, and we need to ask for help from a specialised workshop.”

He thought again about Odd and Yumi, imprisoned in the Mirror. He hoped with all his heart that nothing had happened to them in the meantime.

By his side, his father finished his drink.

“Don’t be pessimistic,” he told him in an encouraging tone. “The fuses saved the most delicate parts of the system.”

“But the motherboard...”

“I’m the one who designed it, along with Hopper. To save parts, we used a normal circuit board with some small adjustments. So all we need to do is take a computer apart, and that’s it.”

“Will this do?” Richard said, taking out his palm-computer.

“Out of the question,” Jeremy blurted, shaking his head with a smile. “The Hoppix codes are on that. But, if I remember correctly, Odd has a laptop under his bed that he never uses. I doubt he’ll be angry if we use it to save his life.”

Richard and Eva leapt up, offering to look for it at Kadic. Michel gave them a nod.

“Takeho Ishiyama would have my head if I don’t bring his daughter back safe and sound before dinner. Family is sacred to him. He told me that many times in the old factory, years ago,” he commented, laughing.

Hopper waded through the ankle-deep, black and nasty-smelling water in the sewers. With some difficulty, he managed to climb a wall, gripping a series of iron handles encrusted in the reinforced concrete.

Yumi and Odd followed close behind him and came out on the bridge to the old factory. They realised that, at that moment, it didn’t seem so old. The road was already blocked, there were warning signs everywhere, and the bridge hadn’t yet rusted.

Hopper entered the factory and descended to the lower floor using a comfortable metal staircase.

"This is different to having to swing down on ropes, like we have to do!" Odd cried.

"Yeah. In ten years, this place had really fallen to bits," Yumi confirmed.

The two teens shuffled into the elevator with Hopper and Aelita. Their friend's head was tilted back and her eyes were closed, her breathing ragged. Her blood still flowed, running down her cheeks as she mumbled incomprehensible sentences in a low voice.

Hopper went straight down to the second underground floor, where the scanners were, and gently left Aelita on the floor. He then kissed her forehead.

"I'm sorry, my dear," he said, rummaging in his coat pockets and taking out a memory card. "I'll record my last memories and put them all in my virtual journal. After that, you and I will cross the threshold into Lyoko. You'll see, we'll begin a new life there, far away from the men in black and the Green Phoenix."

The scene the kids were seeing before their eyes began to slow down, and they felt their chests tighten. This was the professor's final goodbye to Earth.

They followed him to the third underground floor, which held the supercomputer. They observed him pick up a strange machine from the floor, consisting of a pair of leather gloves with a screen on the back.

Hopper inserted the memory card into the gloves, put them on, and rested his fingertips against his forehead.

And then, he disappeared.

It was very sudden. One minute, the professor was there in front of them, as if in real life, and the next, he was no longer there. The supercomputer room was empty.

“What happened?” Yumi cried.

“Hey,” Odd interrupted, “that thing uses memory cards identical to the one my mother found when my father was attacked.”

“Yeah. Hopper must be the one who built it. A machine that collects memories...”

“But the card contained my father’s memories! Aelita’s mother appeared on it! How could my father know her?”

They both remained silent, overwhelmed. They then took the elevator together to the scanner room. It was empty, lifeless. Aelita was no longer there, nor was Professor Hopper.

Yumi sat on the floor and began to reflect on everything.

“The machine we saw records memories. If that’s so, then it seems obvious that Hopper could only insert the memories up until that moment into his journal.”

“So, does that mean the journal stops there?”

Yumi nodded.

“The professor recorded his memory, and then put it in the sandbox for Aelita to find. He then returned here and went to Lyoko with her. That must be how it happened, more or less.”

“How disappointing...” Odd sighed. “It’s like watching a movie and finding out that they cut out the last few minutes...”

“But Aelita was already in bad shape before she was shot,” Yumi thought. “Hopper must have done something to her...”

“Something that affected her memories.”

“And then, he brought her to Lyoko and shut the super-computer down. And they remained trapped there for several years.”

Yumi took the Mirror control box and looked at the screen. A new message had appeared on it: *END*.

But they hadn’t gone back to reality yet. What could that mean?

Too much time had passed. Jeremy and the others must have run into a serious problem. She and Odd could only count on each other.

“Look,” Odd suddenly murmured.

The doors to the room became brighter, an intense yellow colour. And the three scanner columns, in a triangle formation in the centre of the room, began to vibrate.

“Someone’s materialising here!”

“Maybe it’s Professor Hopper coming back.”

“Or maybe... Maybe it’s Ulrich, coming to help us!” Yumi exclaimed, filled with hope.

The vibrations increased in volume before stopping all of a sudden. Then there was a sharp crack.

The doors of one of the scanner columns opened, sliding to the side. Inside was a young man a little taller than Yumi, with slightly long hair and a strange smile on his face.

“He looks a bit like your friend, William Dunbar,” Odd whispered.

The boy’s smile widened.

“Ah, but I am not William. I am X.A.N.A.”

# 10

## VOYAGE TO THE CENTRE OF THE FIRST CITY



When they all reunited in the living room of the Hermitage, it was about eight o' clock in the evening. Missus Della Robbia ordered them pizzas, and all ate them while sitting on the couch and on the floor.

At first, Jeremy was afraid that he would feel uncomfortable, but they ended up talking non-stop for over an hour, distracted by Mister Della Robbia's jokes, who liked to make them almost as much as his son.

"So then," continued Robert, "Hopper tripped, the scanner fell on top of him, and..."

Ulrich almost choked on his drink with his mouth full, then he burst out laughing. Everyone laughed, except for Jeremy and Eva.

“Why are you so serious?” his father asked him.

Jeremy lowered his head.

“Because I think it’s time that we should use the scanner. We already fixed it, and I’d like to use it immediately to bring Yumi and Odd back.” Then, he gave a big sigh before continuing. “No offence, but I think that it should be us, the kids, who enter.”

“Of course,” commented his father, who had suddenly become very serious.

“Right, of course,” added Akiko Ishiyama. “Only children can use the scanners. It’s a terrifying experience for an adult.”

“I’ve always wondered,” asked Ulrich, “why is that?”

“Well, it’s a matter of mental representation, the way that each person imagines themselves subconsciously. Us adults normally make mistakes throughout our lives, and then do things that we regret. Over time, that can cause us to create really terrifying mental images of ourselves. Shortly after having begun our experiments, I myself entered the scanner to test it. I was only on Lyoko for nine seconds, but it took weeks for me to stop shaking like a leaf.”

Jeremy stood and wiped the bread crumbs off his sweater.

“Alright, then we can head to the attic. Aelita and Ulrich will enter the Mirror.”

Eva raised her hand to ask to speak.

“Yes?” spoke Marguerite Della Robbia, who had immediately taken a liking to the girl.

“You see, I think that the first thing we should do isn’t to enter the Mirror, but the other sandbox, the First City. The one that Ulrich and Yumi discovered in Brussels.” The young girl stuttered for a moment before continuing. “We’re all very worried about Yumi and Odd, but we have to remember that right now, less than a kilometre away from us, there is a factory full of soldiers. And they’re probably trying to reactivate Lyoko to transform the First City into a weapon.”

“It’s true,” Professor Hertz added. “The situation is dire, and every moment is critical.”

“But sending our kids to the City could be dangerous...” objected Walter Stern.

“I’ve battled against X.A.N.A. tonnes of times,” Ulrich said to his father with a smile. “Simple soldiers don’t scare me. Besides... I’ll be super careful. I promise.”

Jeremy decided that it was time to get to work.

“So, it’s agreed then. We’ll make two teams: Ulrich and Eva will enter the First City, and immediately afterwards, Aelita will go to the Mirror to save our friends. Let’s do it!”

Jeremy looked at her and Eva nodded.

Was this kid suspicious of something? X.A.N.A. realised that he had been holding in his breath; he exhaled slowly, annoyed. Again, another stupid human habit. Patience was the key. In several moments, he would be safe in the First City.

He didn't know what Aelita would discover when she entered the Mirror. It had already been some time since he had lost contact with the part of him within there. But most likely, Odd and Yumi already knew the truth and wanted to alert their friends.

In the First City, however, he had nothing to fear. Once there, he could sever the connection with Jeremy's computer and finally complete his mission.

He smiled.

"Stay strong," Ulrich reassured her upon seeing her smile. "We'll meet up again there. The virtualisation won't hurt, just tickle a bit."

"I'm not scared," the young girl responded with a neutral tone.

Why would he be? It was a computer, and he had entered and exited these virtual worlds a multitude of times.

The doors to scanner opened in front of Eva and closed behind her. The inside of the scanner was lined with smooth walls reflecting the face that X.A.N.A. could not recognise as his own. But soon enough, he could recover his true form.

He closed his eyes while the humming of the scanner grew louder and louder. He felt a gust of wind that lifted his

body into the air and his feet off the floor. He threw his head back, and his hair flew around his head like a million tentacles. It tickled a bit, as Ulrich had said, and then he landed with a small jump. Eva Skinner opened her eyes.

All around her rose an immense city. Tall towers stood jarringly against a colourless sky. They were tapered with sky-blue rooftops covered in dark specks. Surrounding these imposing buildings were gently-winding roads that appeared as if they were made of colourful crystals. There were smaller houses that resembled Chinese pagodas and narrow streets illuminated by joyful paper lanterns suspended above the doors.

Within Eva, X.A.N.A. struggled for a second to maintain control. He had already been here before. These sections of his memory were still incomplete and he needed to return to Lyoko to finish reconstructing them, but a part of him could still remember. The paths he would take through the city from one end to the other had been well-engraved in his mind...

He stretched out his hand towards the wall of the house closest to him and the bricks separated, gliding as if they were liquid until creating a portal through which he could pass.

The city welcomed its master.

“Oof...” Ulrich exhaled upon landing.

After the virtualisation, the young boy had changed in appearance: his sweater and jeans were replaced with a short

samurai kimono. He wore his hair held back in a headband, and attached to his belt was the empty sheath to his katana.

He was unarmed. Wonderful.

“Wow,” said Ulrich. “You look...you look nice.”

At first, Eva didn't understand what he meant. Then, she looked at her feet and shuddered. She was wearing large, black boots that went up to her knees and ridiculous jeans that were a radioactive, pear green and very tight. Up top, she had on a phosphorescent shirt covered with roses in the shape of an electric guitar and the name *Ceb Digital* all over.

Just what kind of person was Eva? Couldn't she have transformed into a warrior, a fire-fighter, anything other than this?

“Thanks,” she muttered.

“Did you make it?” Jeremy's voice resounded in the ears of the two kids. “Are you alright?”

“Yes,” replied Ulrich, talking to the wind. “And I read you loud and clear.”

“Great,” Jeremy continued. “I'm going to interrupt our communication for a bit now. It's time to virtualise Aelita into the Mirror. We'll talk later.”

“Ok.”

Jeremy's voice disappeared, Eva heard a small click, and the silence returned.

“So,” Ulrich asked her in a friendly manner. “What do we do now?”

“We take a tour,” proposed Eva.

“Alright. But we’ll have to be careful. If I remember correctly, there are several monsters roaming around this place.”

Eva smiled. She wasn’t afraid of monsters. They were her allies.

“Hello? Yumi? Can you hear me?” asked Jeremy.

Aelita pressed her chin into the space between the young boy’s shoulder and neck to get a better look at the computer screen. The image was deformed by electrical discharge and a confusing mix of white and grey lines were all there was to see.

“Odd? Yumi? Do you hear me? It’s Jeremy!”

They still didn’t respond.

“I’m going in,” said Aelita, strongly grabbing her friend’s arm. “I might be able to find them.”

“It could be dangerous,” the boy protested.

“I don’t care.”

While he was talking, Jeremy had continued to type away at the keyboard.

He tried to call his friends again.

“Jeremy?” Odd’s voice finally came in through static. “You chose the perfect moment to turn up.”

Little by little, the image on the screen became clearer and clearer, showing what their friend could see. Yumi was there, dressed as a geisha, and in front of them was a young, dark-haired man with his back turned. The image deformed

due to the static electricity, but the factory scanner columns could still be distinguished.

Aelita's mouth was wide open, and she was taken aback. This boy looked very familiar! But where had she seen him before?

"And who's this guy?" asked Jeremy.

"Jeremy..." they heard Yumi's voice through the computer speakers.

There was more interference and the video disappeared. Jeremy slammed his fist onto the keyboard.

"Did you figure out where they are?" asked Aelita.

"Yes, in a place called '*End of the Journal*'. But I don't have a clue how they got there."

The young girl sighed.

"Well," she exhaled, "let me enter the Mirror, and I will try to find them."

Jeremy nodded and Aelita waved bye to Richard. Odd and Yumi's parents witnessed the scene wordlessly, although they had worried expressions on their faces.

The young girl entered the scanner.

Ulrich didn't understand what was happening.

When he entered the First City with Yumi the first time, they had been almost immediately attacked by an army of flying monsters who fired laser beams at them. Now, however, the streets were deserted.

"This is strange," he murmured. "It's just us."

He turned towards Eva and saw her lips moving. Had he gone crazy or did this girl just say “*Memory download completed*”?

“What was that?” he asked her.

“Nothing,” answered the young girl while shrugging her shoulders. “I was thinking to myself.”

Eva was really sublime in her rock star outfit, but Ulrich started to feel uncomfortable. He was getting the feeling that this girl seemed too at ease in this new and somewhat sinister world.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

“You told me that you and Yumi met up with Hopper the last time you were here. Do you know where?”

Ulrich thought for a bit.

“Yeah, in a park at the centre of the city. There were tall, crystal trees, and...”

“Yeah, the park,” Eva suddenly said. “I think it’s this way.”

Ok, now the situation was getting really bizarre. But Jeremy had interrupted their communication in order to virtualise Aelita into the Mirror, and Ulrich was unarmed. He found it ridiculous that he was worrying so much over Eva. She was just an everyday, average girl, and to top it all off, Odd’s girlfriend. She couldn’t be that bad. Just a tad eccentric, that’s all.

Eva walked with a firm step as she led them to a small square. At its centre, multicoloured jets of water fell from a fountain that turned to soap bubbles floating in the air.

“Over here,” the young girl guided him.

Ulrich saw a group of flying Mantas on patrol from the corner of his eye. They were strange, flat and triangular creatures that used their thin bodies like the sail of a boat. They had two small, soft horns on their muzzles and a large tail from which they could fire lasers.

The young boy jumped and instinctively placed his hand at his side, but his sword’s sheath was empty. It didn’t matter though. The Mantas formed a circle above their heads and then flew away through the air as if they hadn’t even noticed their presence.

*I need to calm down, thought Ulrich. I’m starting to hallucinate.*

Eva was about to head down a narrow road between the houses at the end of the square.

Had this road always been there? Ulrich didn’t remember it. It seemed to him that on the other side of the fountain, there had been nothing but a compact row of houses.

He suddenly stopped.

“You,” he said to Eva. “Who are you?”

The young girl furrowed her brow and Ulrich began to feel stupid. But he should trust his instincts.

“These Mantas,” he continued, “passed by us and they didn’t even see us. You walk around as if you own the place. And now...you opened an alleyway. I don’t know how, but I’m sure that that road wasn’t there a minute ago. The houses moved aside to let you pass.”

“Yes,” was Eva’s simple response. “It’s pointless to continue on with this act anyway.”

The young girl fell to her knees and opened her mouth. Ulrich saw a cloud of black smoke exiting from between her lips and then from her nose as well. The smoke twisted in the air, becoming more and more dense. It started to take form.

Shortly after, Eva was spread out on the ground, unconscious, and in front of her appeared a tall, young man with dark hair.

“X.A.N.A.,” he murmured.

The young man didn’t reply. He turned his back to Ulrich and started walking away.

Ulrich grumbled, jumped ahead of him and blocked the way. He held his fists up to his face and bent his legs, readying himself.

“Did you think I’d let you off the hook just like that?”

X.A.N.A. smiled. There was no warmth in his face. It was as if his mouth moved separately from the rest of his body.

“I’m the one who let you off the hook. I need to find Professor Hopper, and I have absolutely no need for you, so you can do as you please. Take care of that stupid kid until she wakes up, explore a little, or go take a nap. Anything’s fine with me so long as you keep to yourself.”

A crazy, obnoxious laugh came from Ulrich’s mouth.

“Of course, why not? Then you’ll let me return to the Hermitage?”

“That, you won’t be able to do, because I’ve closed off the communication channels with the real world. I needed to wait several minutes, so that your friend could establish contact with the Mirror. You see, it’s been days now since I possessed the body of your roommate. When the Hermitage scanner broke, I lost contact with that part of me, and I needed to recover my memory of the latest events in order to devise my course of action.”

Odd! X.A.N.A. had taken possession of Odd’s body! So that was the reason why Eva had insisted on being immediately virtualised to the First City. That was the reason why...

Ulrich snapped out of his thoughts when he felt his blood rush to his head and his breathing accelerate more and more. He jumped forward and lifted his right leg, giving a roundhouse kick to the air.

He froze mid-jump, the ball of his foot suspended only centimetres away from X.A.N.A.’s face. He was paralysed.

“What a bother,” sighed the young man, while lowering his hand with the palm facing down.

A sudden gust of wind violently pushed Ulrich back. His back slammed into the door of a house and took a hit to the head before falling to the ground.

“Here, you’re on my turf,” said X.A.N.A. “Don’t cause me to lose my patience. As far as I’m concerned, whether I kill you now or let you live is of no importance.”

The young man with black hair slowly left, disappearing into an alley.

Instantly, Ulrich turned his gaze towards Eva Skinner, who was still unconscious. Should he try to wake her up? She wasn't in any danger, seeing as the monsters wouldn't attack her. And he needed to make a decision.

He stood up again, rubbing his back with his hands, and started off after his enemy.

# 11

## FRIENDS DON'T FORGET EACH OTHER



In the Mirror, Dido was much younger than Aelita knew her to be during the videoconference. The same thing could be said of Professor Hertz, or rather, Major Steinback.

“Tell me where the supercomputer that you have constructed is located,” said Dido, seated at a small bar table, “and let me destroy it. I will erase your mind of certain confidential information, only the most dangerous details, and then leave you to live in peace. You two as well as Aelita. I’m offering you salvation.”

Hertz responded that this was out of the question and Dido resumed her speech.

“Be smart about this. You know to what extent I can be dangerous.”

At that moment, the control box hit Aelita right in the head and rolled across the floor, stopping not far from her. The girl picked it up.

“According to the computer,” Jeremy’s voice immediately sounded, “you’ve just made contact with the Mirror’s navigation interface. It’s telling me that it’s an interaction system that allows you to practically touch and use objects along your way. But most importantly, using it, you can move from one place to another in your father’s journal...or rather, from one moment to another.”

Aelita paused to think. She had materialised on a road that led to the old factory, just as Yumi and Odd had. And she now looked how she usually did on Lyoko, like a pointy-eared elf dressed in a short, pink shirt and soft leather boots of the same colour.

The girl had run into Professor Hertz while walking down the road and had followed her to the café, where she had then heard her conversation with Dido. And now, the control box.

Gripping it hard in her right fist, Aelita left the café and breathed in the fresh morning air. This virtual world was so...perfect. She could sense the smells and the light touch of the wind against her skin. She hadn't even felt the slightest bit of vertigo that always resulted from virtualisation.

“Yumi and Odd are at the end of the Mirror, correct?” she asked Jeremy.

“Yes,” he immediately replied.

“So if I continuously press the Forward button on this control...sooner or later, I'll get to them.”

She didn't wait to hear her friend's response; there was no doubt that her idea was right.

She pressed the button on the box and the sky rained down on her head: thousands of drops of light blue fell on her like hot wax.

Buildings began to darken. Windows on an apartment block stretched downwards, drawing a series of obscure lines on the concrete façade. Streetlights bowed, bending towards the ground before turning into puddles that spread across the bitumen.

It took but a few seconds for this calm city to change into a very different place, a place that Aelita knew all too well: the third underground floor of the factory.

“I did it!” she exclaimed enthusiastically. “I'm in the factory. I've found them.”

“Sorry, but no,” Jeremy fumbled. “Look at the screen on the box.”

Aelita did as he said. The screen read *1 June 1994* and the time. It was 4:30 in the afternoon.

“The Mirror encompasses several different days,” Jeremy observed. “Although you're in the factory, Yumi and Odd aren't with you, because you're in a different moment. I can't

tell you when it is exactly, but I suppose that the Mirror ends at a moment on the 6th of June, the day when you went to Lyoko with your father.”

Aelita nodded silently. She suddenly noticed a familiar shadow obscured by the large cylinder of the supercomputer, but she briskly turned away so as not to see it. If her father was there, she didn't want to see him; she didn't feel ready. Deep down, it was nothing but a recording. And her top priority was to find her friends.

She pressed the button on the box a second time, and again, and again. The waxy rain transformed into a tempest of colours that coated her elf clothes. The world surrounding Aelita was changing at a vertiginous rate. The factory, the attic and the Hermitage living room; images of her father, appearing for a moment before evaporating in the blink of an eye like a ghost...

Aelita closed her eyes while continuing to hammer the button with her thumb.

“Stop,” Jeremy said. “You're there. It's the end of the Mirror.”

Aelita once again found herself on the third underground floor of the factory, but this time, nobody was there. The resulting silence was almost surreal. Yumi and Odd were on the second floor, the scanner room, and to get to them, Aelita had to use the lift. She readied herself to confront X.A.N.A.

The park in the First City was surrounded by a tall, metallic grid which currently had no opening, but X.A.N.A. simply had to wave a hand in front of him to twist the bars to the sides, creating a hole large enough for him to pass through effortlessly.

The young man entered without even looking around. Ulrich counted to ten in his head and followed him inside.

He found himself in a dense grove composed of blue trees with thin trunks, twisted branches and thorns all over. They were a luminous, almost resplendent colour; unnatural in every way.

Ulrich brushed one of them with his hand and immediately drew back, suppressing a whimper. A deep cut had opened in his hand, already beginning to bleed. These trees were sharp.

*This world is one of the most dangerous ones*, he thought to himself. He had already realised this when he had come here with Yumi using the equipment in Brussels, but at that time he had used the outmoded gloves and helmets to connect to the virtual reality, rather than actually going there. He had to stay alert now.

He prudently moved forward, head low and following the dull sound of X.A.N.A.'s footsteps in front of him, until he heard a voice.

“Children, at last! I’ve been waiting so long for children to come here...”

Ulrich held his breath. X.A.N.A. had just found the “ghost” of Franz Hopper.

The boy closed the gap between X.A.N.A. and himself as fast as he could and hid behind a shrub of pointed crystals that seemed to be made of pieces of broken bottles all fused together.

The professor walked on air, his feet a few centimetres above the ground. He then stopped. His usual lab coat was open and he was wearing glasses and had a long beard, but...

Ulrich could see through his body, as if he were nothing but a cloud of coloured vapour.

“Is that really you, Professor?” X.A.N.A. asked him, standing in front of the man.

“I’ve waited here for years. Since I discovered that the First City could be turned into a weapon.”

Hopper had not responded to him. He was nothing but a recording, exactly like the ones in the journal in the Mirror. Ulrich saw X.A.N.A. clench his fists. He acted swiftly, throwing two punches at the man, but the boy’s hands went straight through him without doing him any harm.

Hopper’s image trembled, and he continued to speak:

“Obviously, I’m not here with you. Unfortunately. But maybe I can help you... And you can also help me. Follow me.”

The ghost began to retreat between the trees but X.A.N.A. didn’t move an inch; instead, he began to speak loudly.

“Ulrich, come out of there,” he said. “It makes me nervous to have you prowling around behind me like a little dog.”

Oh no, he'd been spotted.

Ulrich rose from behind the bush and lightly flexed his knees, ready to escape into the trees if need be.

X.A.N.A. might actually be quicker than him, but it was worth a shot.

“You left Eva back there?” the young man asked him.

“Yes.”

“I promise that she will be fine for now. Let's get going, I don't want to lose sight of Hopper. You can keep me company.”

X.A.N.A. simply began to walk in the direction the ghost had gone. After a second of stupor, Ulrich decided to follow him.

Keep him company? This X.A.N.A. was far different to the emotionless monster he and the rest of the group had fought on Lyoko. Maybe his rebirth had changed him, made him more human.

But Ulrich hadn't the least intention of letting his guard down.

The metallic doors of the elevator slid aside, but Aelita remained rooted to the spot.

The scanner columns were in front of her. She saw Yumi and Odd. And that other boy with long, black hair. She finally recognised him.

“Aelita,” Jeremy’s voice spurted into her ear, communicating from reality, “our friends are fighting X.A.N.A. But don’t worry; now I’ve managed to re-establish contact, I can get you out of there in no time.”

“Wait,” she responded.

Now that she could see X.A.N.A. in person, she was sure that he seemed very familiar to her. The shape of his eyes, his nose, his shoulders...he brought to mind an old friend. Was she going crazy?

Yumi and Odd stood, smiling timidly.

“You didn’t have to come...” Yumi told her.

“This is all my fault,” Odd commented, looking at her sadly. “Eva Skinner is X.A.N.A. and I didn’t even realise!”

All of a sudden, Aelita’s ears were filled with voices. In reality, Jeremy, Professor Hertz and the others’ parents had begun to argue.

“Eva is X.A.N.A.?”

“But Ulrich is with her in the First City!”

“We have to help him!”

Aelita remained immobile. It was so strange...X.A.N.A. was there, in the Mirror, but at the same time, he was inside Eva Skinner, in the other virtual world.

The young man with dark hair bowed in greeting.

“Don’t worry. Ulrich and Eva are fine, although they cannot leave the First City: I blocked the connection to the Hermitage scanner.”

“You...”

“I wanted to see you.”

“Why?” Aelita asked.

X.A.N.A.’s eyes were riveted on her. He completely ignored Yumi and Odd, who were retreating little by little towards their friend. This monster in the body of a boy was concentrating on Aelita. And he smiled.

“You must remember me. I don’t want to talk about when I controlled Lyoko, but how I was in the beginning, when I adopted the form of a small boy and you and I spent all our afternoons together.”

“Together?” she echoed, unsteady.

There was something in the beginning? Aelita remembered X.A.N.A.’s monsters attacking her. She remembered the towers she had to enter to stop the mad artificial intelligence from destroying the world. And she remembered her father, who had given his life to destroy X.A.N.A. He had killed him. She was talking to her father’s assassin. She could not forget that for a single second.

“Yes,” the young man exclaimed. “You came to see me every day in the First City. We always played together. You were my first – my only – friend. Up until the day when your father decided that I was dangerous, that I could lose control...and he forced you to never come see me again.”

“I don’t remember any of that,” Aelita admitted, confused.

“Guys,” Jeremy’s voice sounded in her ear again, “this monster is right: I can’t get in contact with the First City. But

I am connected to you, so I'm going to materialise you back into reality right away. It's too dangerous to stay there."

"Got it, boss," Odd whispered.

Aelita, on the other hand, made a negative gesture with her head.

"You go. I want to stay here."

"Have you gone crazy?" Yumi asked, full of concern and gripping her arm. "This guy is X.A.N.A.! He could hurt you! He could even..."

"If he's right," Aelita interrupted, "if at one time, we were friends, then I want to stay here and get a better understanding of everything. Friends don't forget each other. If I did, I need to know why."

With these words, X.A.N.A. smiled again.

Aelita should have hated him. He murdered her father! It was his fault that she was all alone! But this boy had a shy look, as if he were a little scared. Aelita felt that she needed to let her instincts guide her.

X.A.N.A. stretched out one arm with a closed fist and then raised his index finger. The finger began to lengthen and seemed to become thinner as well. The nail grew darker and the finger continued to grow larger and thinner, while becoming an intense green colour. And then, the upper part became a rosebud, opening into a red rose.

"Hmmm," murmured Yumi from behind her. "Flowers. Never trust a man who gives you flowers: he's surely done something wrong."

Aelita didn't really pay attention to her friend.

"You can leave," she repeated. "Jeremy, materialise them into reality." She raised her voice to add her final word, "I'm staying here."

"Are you sure?"

Aelita nodded silently, eyes glued to the strange boy whose finger had just blossomed.

"If that's what you want."

When she turned around, Odd and Yumi had disappeared. She was alone in the Mirror. Alone with X.A.N.A.

The parents of the two teens who had just come out of the Mirror threw themselves onto their children, embracing and kissing them.

"I'm fine, Daddy, I'm fine!" Yumi said, trying to pry herself away from him.

"Mum, please be careful, you're going to mess up my hair!" Odd implored.

But they laughed. They weren't expecting to see their parents there, in the Hermitage. And they didn't understand how they could know all about Lyoko, Professor Hopper and their adventures.

Jeremy sighed and shifted his gaze away from them to concentrate on the computer once more. He had lost contact with Ulrich, and now with Aelita too. The scanner was only transmitting electrostatic discharges now, and he wasn't receiving any audio or video signal. X.A.N.A. had left him com-

pletely isolated. He felt paradoxically trapped in the real world. He felt a hand on his shoulder and turned, meeting Richard's bright eyes and shy smile.

"You're worried about her, aren't you?"

Jeremy nodded.

"So am I. But we need to trust Aelita. She's always been very empathetic. You know what I mean? She manages to put herself in other peoples' shoes, to understand them and be by their side."

"X.A.N.A. is not a person," Jeremy grumbled. "It's a computer program."

"That may be so," Richard consented. "Or maybe there's something we still don't know, and that she managed to sense somehow. She made her decision, and we need to respect that for now. You'll see, everything will be fine in the end."

Jeremy felt all his fatigue weigh down on him in one go. It had been a very long day, what with their parents' arrival at Kadic, bringing their memories back, repairing the scanner... And now this.

Their arch enemy, X.A.N.A., was back. There were even two of him. It was really too much for just one day, and he felt his hands tremble against the keyboard.

"And what do we do now?"

"We need to go back to the school," Professor Hertz responded. "I'll talk to the principal about preparing some rooms for our guests..."

“Oh, but there’s no need!” Akiko Ishiyama immediately intervened. “Our house is right nearby, and we have more than enough room for everyone.”

“Alright then,” the professor nodded. “But Jeremy and Odd need to come back to school with me. Principal Delmas is nervous enough after they skipped classes yesterday and today... And now, the icing on the cake, I have to explain Eva, Ulrich and Aelita’s disappearances to him.”

Odd nervously tapped his hands together a few times, enthused. He had been thinking of sleeping with his mother and father, like he had when he was younger.

And Jeremy rejoiced at the idea of returning to the school and burying himself under the sheets, in his own room. He was dying of sleep deprivation. He didn’t yet know that this night, he would get barely any sleep at all.

# 12

## MEMORY'S TRUE IDENTITY



Professor Hopper was floating in the air several steps away from them.

“We’re here.”

The road that Ulrich and X.A.N.A. were on was the colour of rubies and crossed the sky of the First City like a large, wind-blown scarf, without the need of columns or any support to hold it up.

At a certain point, the road veered jarringly to the left, and it was only upon reaching the end of the turn that Ulrich noticed the presence of the castle that a moment earlier had been hidden by the blue skyscrapers that were sprung up all around like crystal fingers.

The castle stood at the very centre of the First City. It was a black building in the form of a hexagon, its upper levels finished off with ore and stone gargoyles. It had neither doors nor windows of any sort, as if the fortress had been carved out of a single block of stone. Ulrich clenched his teeth and jumped down from the road in the air. It was a ten-metre drop, but the young man landed on all fours without the slightest of harm. This was one of the advantages of the virtual world.

“Wow!” he exclaimed.

A short distance away, there was another golden ribbon road that rose above the ground and led to the castle, encircling it twice only to disappear somewhere over the horizon.

X.A.N.A. arrived beside Ulrich without even needing to jump, levitating gracefully over to the boy. He gestured to him, and they started to travel down the golden path together, approaching the imposing castle. Ulrich didn't think he had ever seen such an intense black before: it absorbed all the light around it, storing it in its opaque interior.

Hopper materialised in front of them and pointed to a concrete point somewhere underneath them.

“Look,” he said.

Corresponding to each peak of the hexagon, six rows of black bricks covered the ground of the city, forming six straight lines that became lost through the towers and streets, dividing them apart like architectural scissors. From

above, the castle must seem like the black centre of a giant star.

“You must pay close attention, children,” Hopper continued. “This castle is a weapon. I built it with the men in black and neither Anthea nor I were able to do anything to prevent it.”

Ulrich realised that the professor wasn't really looking at them. His eyes bored into space. He remembered that this wasn't really Aelita's father, only an extremely sophisticated computer program.

“I wanted to deactivate the castle and render it harmless. I hoped that this way, the First City could transform into a gift for humanity instead of an instrument of destruction. Unfortunately, I committed an error. While I was fleeing from the men in black, I needed to reconstruct the city to be able to continue my research. But with it, I also needed to reconstruct the castle. This is when I understood that deactivating it wouldn't be possible.”

Hopper stopped and gave a sigh before continuing, “That is why I have decided to isolate it in a sandbox, forever enclosing the city in a place where it can cause no damage, and I built Lyoko. Lyoko was built as a barrier world capable of blocking the harmful effects of the castle while leaving intact its beneficial powers. But in order for my plan to be realised, I needed an ally, someone capable of controlling Lyoko and the First City. I needed a guardian.”

“A guardian?” whispered Ulrich.

“Yes,” said the young black-haired man opposite him with a smile. “Me.”

“The guardian,” Hopper continued. “Must be a very sophisticated artificial intelligence. I named him X.A.N.A., and to teach him to be ‘human’, I let he and my daughter, Aelita, become friends.”

Odd yawned and rolled over. He tried to put his head under his pillow and count sheep, but nothing could be done about it, so he gave up and switched on the lamp on his nightstand. He looked at the alarm clock. It was barely three in the morning.

The young man couldn’t stay calm. Too many thoughts kept rolling about in his mind like a caged tornado. After their return to the real world, the others got them up to date on the situation, and it was a real mess. All of their parents had been collaborators with Hopper.

And Walter Stern... He was nothing but a traitor. Poor Ulrich. That must be difficult for his friend to take in!

Another thing that kept him from sleeping was the memory of his father that he had found in the memory card: the video of Aelita’s mother, kidnapped and gagged. Before heading to bed, Odd had talked with Jeremy a bit about it, but his friend was so exhausted that he might not have even heard him.

And, what’s more, he had another thought, one that covered all the rest like a black veil: Eva Skinner. For the first

time in his life, Odd felt ready to have a girlfriend and to dedicate himself solely to her. And then, what did he discover? That Eva wasn't a real person, but X.A.N.A., his enemy!

Odd had fallen in love with a computer program! And an evil program to make things worse!

"THAT'S IT!" he cried, and this time, he pulled out his sheets with a kick and stood up.

With Ulrich shut in the First City, his room felt empty and sad, and Odd needed to speak with someone, with a real friend.

He reached for his phone and turned it on. Then, he waited several seconds for the old device to get going and tried to call Jeremy. His phone was off.

"Well, you won't escape me!" he commented enthusiastically. "You're going to keep me company, even if I have to kick down your door!"

Odd let out a small laugh and put on a large jacket over his pyjamas.

It had already been several long minutes since he knocked on Jeremy's door, but his friend hadn't come to open it. He must be in a deep sleep...

For a moment, Odd thought he'd leave him be. After all, it was late and Jeremy might need some sleep. Then, his attention was caught by the doorknob. There was something strange about the lock... It was scratched, and the metal was bent towards the outside.

*Has someone broken in?*

The idea hadn't yet fully formed in his head, and so Odd was already turning the knob. He heard the lock protest with a quiet creak. He clenched his teeth and pushed the door with his shoulder. The lock suddenly gave way, causing the young man to fall flat on his face once in the room.

Jeremy's room was pitch black. The light from the hall filtered inside forming a bright triangle that spread across the floor all the way to his friend's empty and unmade bed. The sheets and covers were rolled up in a ball as if they had been shoved away with a kick.

Where could Jeremy have gone at this time of night? And why were there those marks on the lock? He found the light switch on the wall and turned on the light, closing the door behind him. This was good ol' Jeremy's room all right. Perfectly in order, except for his desk, which was completely covered in computers and other machines. Hanging on the wall just above the bed was his poster of Einstein sticking his tongue out at the camera. And on the other side of the room was his closet. Odd approached the desk, but he didn't see anything strange. He turned around, then realised that there was a note tacked to the back of the door.

The young man snatched it up immediately. The tack popped out and fell to the ground with a *ting* as Odd's eyes opened wide. It was a simple business card with a drawing of a strange bird and the words *Green Phoenix* printed on it in

very historical typography. On the reverse side, someone had written in a very legible manner, *Your friend is now with us.*

The Green Phoenix had kidnapped Jeremy.

Jeremy was immobilised.

The man with the sharp face had broke into his room without making the slightest bit of noise and taken him without giving him time to react. A true professional.

Jeremy then realised who he was facing. It was, without a shadow of a doubt, Grigory Nictapolus, the man with the dogs who had used the memory-snatching machine on Robert Della Robbia and the Ishiyamas.

The young man had been taken out in two seconds. He smelled a strange odour climb into his nose and he lost consciousness.

Upon awakening, he found himself paralysed. His arms were tied behind his back and his legs bent behind him with his heels digging into his back. He couldn't see anything either. Someone had taken away his glasses and his head was in a black canvas bag that restricted his breathing. His head hurt, his mouth was sealed by something that tasted like plastic (*adhesive tape*, he thought) and his ankles and wrists had been bound up tightly in such a way as to cause him a lot of pain each time he tried to move.

Jeremy tried to remain calm. How much time had gone by since he was taken? *Think, think*, he said to himself. When Grigory arrived, he had just gone to sleep and he hadn't felt

the need to drink or go to the bathroom, so it could only have been several hours maximum that he was unconscious. It was probably three or four o' clock in the morning. Odd and the others wouldn't notice his absence until the following morning. He couldn't hope for an immediate rescue. Furthermore, how could they rescue him? Grigory was armed and dangerous, and his friends...

"The kid's awake," came a catty, masculine voice.

Jeremy felt a pair of hands grab him and he tried to get away from them and cry out, but he wasn't able to. Someone slightly lifted the sack from his head, and a hand entered holding a tissue soaked with a substance that flooded his nostrils.

Jeremy swallowed his spit. He shouldn't...breathe it... in...

His struggle only lasted a few moments. Then, he felt his head become heavier and heavier before he passed out again.

Principal Delmas's uncombed, grey beard and his puffy eyes fit those of someone who had too little sleep. Professor Hertz also seemed exhausted. Odd shivered under his jacket. He was still wearing his pyjamas underneath and his bare feet were frozen.

"What are you going to do?" he asked the adults.

Immediately after having discovered the note, the young man went to fill in the professor, and then, they went togeth-

er to call the principal. They still hadn't informed Jeremy's father and the others. It was more important to trace out a good plan first.

"We have to call the police," Delmas spoke decisively.

"Or better, Dido," Odd quickly contradicted him.

Jeremy had told him everything that happened during the time he was in the Mirror as well as their alliance with the boss of the men in black.

"Dido?" said the principal, raising an eyebrow. "And just who is this Dido?"

"Um, um..." spoke the professor while throwing a deadly look Odd's way.

But the young man didn't let that intimidate him. Jeremy had been kidnapped! This wasn't a good time to worry about formalities.

"Dido is a secret agent," he explained. "She manages a government agency!"

He tried to summarise the situation as best he could, remembering what Jeremy had told him. Hertz sighed with resignation and helped him to explain everything to the principal.

At the end of the story, there was a long moment of silence. Delmas wrung his hands together nervously, then gave an audible sigh.

"Professor, is this all true?"

"Yes," Hertz replied to him, holding his gaze.

“Some of my students are involved in an international plot, and there is a supercomputer that is also a deadly weapon, and you are allied with a secret agency to fight against an army of terrorists?”

“Coooooorrect!” nodded Odd with enthusiasm.

“And you haven’t told me anything until they’ve now kidnapped one of the students?”

Odd started to get the feeling that the principal wasn’t totally happy with the situation, and he bit his lip.

“You shouldn’t worry about it, Mister Delmas,” he said, trying to smile. “Jeremy is a smart kid, and he can take care of himself. And the same goes for Aelita and Ulrich and Eva. I know this all seems rather...well...desperate, but you’ll see, we’ll get through it.”

“Maybe,” murmured Delmas, acceptingly. “At this point, it seems useless to me to call the police. Professor Hertz, call this Dido and ask her what we can do. In the meantime, I’ll get in contact with the children’s parents and tell them to come here immediately.”

Odd tried to think what Jeremy would say in his place. What ideas would he have?

“That won’t be enough, Mister Delmas,” he said, standing up. “You also need to think about the other students. Kadic is now in danger. You have to wake them all up and have them prepare to defend the school!”

The principal and the professor looked at him, stupefied.

Jeremy opened his eyelids. He was still tied up at the feet and hands, but he was no longer laid out on his stomach on the ground, but sat up on a wooden chair with armrests and a rotating seat.

Someone had removed the adhesive tape over his mouth and his head was no longer covered, although it didn't make a big difference considering that he was still without his glasses.

The young man found himself in a very small room that smelled of dust and was largely occupied by a wide desk (it was so close to him that the edge of the table pushed into his knees), and a large metal filing cabinet that sat to his right.

In front of him was a door, and to the left, a window through which an icy breeze and fine blue light entered. It was surely almost daybreak.

Even without being able to distinguish the details of the place, Jeremy quickly understood where he was: in the director's office in the old factory that was situated in the middle of the river. The same factory that housed Lyoko's super-computer and which, for the time being, was being occupied by the soldiers of the Green Phoenix.

He smiled. In a sense, Aelita and Ulrich were there, close to him, virtualised in the sandboxes of the supercomputer. He hoped that they would be ok and that they were doing well to keep out of X.A.N.A.'s clutches.

*I need to get out of here, thought Jeremy. And as quick as possible.*

He tried to move. Someone had placed his arms behind his back, and they were attached to his ankles with plastic cords or something of the sort. His feet were pressed against the pivoting base of the chair, but each movement that he made with them echoed to his wrists, causing him to painfully jolt.

He clenched his teeth and tried to turn around using his back. The chair moved slightly. He continued in the opposite direction with more force and found his elbow pressed against the desk. Now, he could bend his arm, and he could maybe manage to tilt the chair and cause it to fall to the ground. From there, with a bit of luck...

The office door opened, and Jeremy stopped moving, slowly turning his head towards the person who came in and moved their hand about the wall looking for the light switch. After hearing the click, he had to shut his eyes as they had adjusted to the darkness.

This unknown person closed the door behind her and approached him.

“They didn’t give you back your glasses yet, did they? Here.”

It was a woman, and she had a friendly voice.

Jeremy felt delicate fingers place the frame of his glasses correctly on his nose. The woman then sat on the desk, several centimetres from him, with her legs crossed. She must be at least fifty years old. She was red-headed and her face was clean, without any type of make-up. She was wearing

jeans and a shirt, and a lab coat over top with a screwdriver sticking out of the pocket.

"I'm Memory. What's your name?"

"Jeremy," he replied, even though this wasn't much of a question... If they had kidnapped him, they had to know without a doubt who he was.

"Don't be scared, Jeremy. Everything will be ok. We need you... But I'm sure that you'll help us, and afterwards, you can go back to the school."

"I don't have the slightest intention of helping a bunch of terrorists," Jeremy spat out, looking at her fixedly.

"Please," Memory's voice seemed upset, "think before you act and don't be careless. My boss, Hannibal Mago... well, let's just say that sometimes he can be somewhat impulsive."

Hannibal Mago, the head of Green Phoenix... Suddenly, Jeremy felt dizzy.

"I came here," the woman continued, "to bring you to him and warn you that you need to be careful. I wouldn't want something to happen to you."

She seemed sincere, but Jeremy's heart continued to race. Hannibal Mago...and he was on the verge of meeting him.

Memory stood up and took out a utility knife from her coat. While she moved around, the neck of her shirt opened slightly and Jeremy's eyes caught sight of something around the woman's neck. Memory was wearing a delicate, golden

chain, but it was the end of the necklace that caught the young boy's attention. It was round and as large as an old coin, and two letters were engraved on it, a *W* and an *A*, surrounded by a sailor's knot.

Jeremy knew this necklace well, because Aelita had one exactly like it. Her father had left it for her before he disappeared. And Aelita's hair was a magnificent fire red colour. Just like Anthea's, her mother. Just like Memory's.

# 13

## IN KADIC'S TRENCHES



“You’re the one...who organised all this?” Yumi said while looking at Odd, eyes round as saucers.

He grinned from ear to ear.

“Well, at first, I was scared and worried about our friends, but afterwards I asked myself, ‘what would Jeremy do now?’. And so everything just came to me like that.”

The girl also smiled, and opened the physics laboratory door for him.

Odd stepped in lightly, a roll of paper under his arm.

They were all meeting there: his parents, Yumi’s parents, Ulrich’s father, Jeremy’s father, the principal, professor Hertz, Jim Morales and Richard Dupuis. In short, he had a large audience.

Michel Belpois was sitting hunched over in a corner. But Walter Stern didn't look any better.

"The mood's a bit dark, isn't it?" Odd murmured to Yumi, before going on alone towards the principal's chair, where he cleared his throat and made a low bow. "Ladies and gentlemen, for the first time in the history of my adventures and misadventures as a student at this school, I'll now be the one who teaches you!"

Nobody laughed. He didn't even get a half-smile. His mother, Marguerite, frowned, as if to tell him to stop clowning around.

"Hm, I see that your sense of humour is somewhat lacking... In that case, I'll get straight to the point."

Odd took the large roll of paper out from under his arm and asked Yumi to help him tape it to the blackboard with scotch.

It was a map of Kadic showing every building.

The boy took a long stick from beside the blackboard and used it to gesture to the map.

"This, as you can tell, is our school. After having discovered last night, when defying the danger, that our friend had been despicably kidnapped..."

Yumi tugged on his arm and Odd sighed. Nobody understood that this was his grand debut as an actor. He decided to make his tone a little less dramatic.

"Professor Hertz and I got in contact with Dido. We know that Jeremy was kidnapped by the Green Phoenix, probably

by a certain Grigory Nictapolus, who we have nicknamed, 'the man with dogs'. The very same man who used the memory-snatching machine on my father and Yumi's parents. Among other things, it seems that this man has neutralised three of Dido's secret agents who were keeping the factory where the supercomputer is under surveillance."

Odd observed his audience. He had their undivided attention. He felt very pleased with himself.

"We need to prepare to defend Kadic at all costs. We know that a heap of soldiers have gathered at the old factory and for the moment, Dido would rather avoid having her men intervene. The thing is, seeing the results... Basically, the main worry is that this place is like a sieve."

Odd was absolutely certain of this. Just after having called Dido, he, Hertz and Jim did reconnaissance from one end of Kadic to the other. Finding out where Grigory Nictapolus got in hadn't been difficult: the boiler room door was always open and the cover of the manhole leading into the sewers had been displaced.

"We need to block the entrance to the sewers here and here," Odd explained. "Right here, there's a manhole that provides access through the park and which is directly connected to the factory. And then there's a passage that leads to the Hermitage. We need to protect the walls and close the gates.

"Also, we need to organise an expedition to the Hermitage because we'll need the scanner, and so getting to it is of top

priority, given that it's our only way of bringing Aelita, Ulrich and Eva back to reality. This could be a tough job and we're going to need all of your help. And from the rest of the students. If there are no objections, as soon as we finish this meeting, Yumi and Jim will go to wake the students and prepare the first line of defence. As for us, Mister Belpois, Richard and I will go to the Hermitage," Odd caught his breath, and waited for a moment. "Any questions?" he finally concluded.

He chuckled softly. He'd always wanted to say that!

Memory had freed his wrists but his arms were still tied behind his back. The woman gently led him out of the room. Jeremy leaned too far forward at first, almost fell over and had to take two quick steps to regain his balance. He held his breath.

The director's office led out onto a metallic walkway suspended several metres above the floor.

The area below them hadn't really changed since the last time Jeremy had been there. All over the place were armed soldiers and large steel containers with the Green Phoenix symbol engraved on their sides. Beside the elevator leading to the underground floors, someone had erected an enormous Bedouin tent: a green, nomadic-style tent, with pegs driven directly into the cement.

Jeremy and Memory descended to the ground floor, using a comfortable slow-moving escalator put in place of the factory's old staircase, which had been destroyed over time.

The boy noticed a man with very short hair dressed in a leather jacket waiting for them just beside the tent. He held a double leash – also leather – tightly in his hands, attached to the collars of his two dogs: two large and muscular Rottweilers.

“Grigory,” Jeremy greeted him coldly.

He smiled only with his mouth, a gesture that didn't show in his eyes even for a moment.

“The boss is waiting for you,” he said before addressing Jeremy. “It's a pleasure to see you again, runt.”

The teen tried to hide his fear.

“I finally know the man who managed to erase himself from security footage while he prowled around the Hermitage at night,” he said, staring him right in the face.

Grigory winked at him, without appearing offended.

“Yes, you caught me. You're very crafty kids. But that is no longer of any importance. We've already won. I was just about to give your friends a little surprise.”

Jeremy tried to take a step forward but Memory seized him by the binding around his elbows, preventing him from moving. The boy rushed at the man, and, at the precise moment of his strike, he felt the length of plastic tighten around his arms.

“What do you think you're doing? You can't...”

Grigory didn't respond and limited himself to shaking the leashes as if they were whips, and with that he and his two villainous mongrels moved away from the tent.

"Don't even think about messing around with that man, understood?" Memory said to Jeremy, moving to face him while regarding him harshly, "He's too dangerous."

The inside of the tent was filled with an intense aroma of sweet spices, and the floor was covered in thick carpets.

Hannibal Mago was waiting for them, seated with his legs crossed on a pile of cushions. He wore an orange three-piece suit and a hat of the same colour, his fingers were covered in rings and his feet were bare.

"Mago, sir," Memory said, "I've brought you the boy, Jeremy."

The woman left the tent after giving a bow and Jeremy was left alone with the mysterious man, Hannibal Mago, the boss of the Green Phoenix. The man who had kidnapped Anthea several years earlier.

The boy decided to greet him using his real name.

"Hello, Mister Mark Hollenback."

Mago raised his head, though his eyes remained hidden under the brim of his hat. Jeremy could see gold canine teeth inside his mouth, shining in a threatening fashion.

"Call me by that name again," Mago murmured, "and they will be the last two words you ever say."

The threat hung in the air for a moment like a dense cloud.

"How do you know who I am?" Mago then asked, inclining his head towards Jeremy.

"Ten years ago," the young man said, shrugging his shoulders, "when Professor Hopper moved to Paris... someone gave him a file about you."

It was Professor Hertz, of course, during the time when she was still Major Steinback. Jeremy had witnessed the scene when Aelita went into the first level of her father's virtual journal, in the Hermitage.

"The person who kidnapped Anthea, or Aelita's mother, as she's also known. And now that I've seen Memory, I made the connection," Jeremy concluded in a defiant tone.

Mago began to laugh, producing a sound that would make one's hair stand on end, like the squeaking of chalk against a blackboard.

"Grigory was right when he said you're a resourceful kid. So everything must be clear to you? You already know that Memory is really Hopper's wife? That's fantastic! You've saved me from doing a lot of work."

Jeremy felt beads of sweat begin to drip down his forehead. This man seemed completely crazy.

"Well, let's get straight down to business, my young friend. I came to this horrible factory to enter Lyoko, but I've run into a small problem..."

Jeremy couldn't help but smile.

“Your men can’t enter the virtual world. They’re adults.”

Seeing the expression on the man’s face, Jeremy understood that Hannibal Mago absolutely hated being interrupted. But the man then nodded.

“I already tried with about twenty soldiers, but none of them managed to take even a tiny step while there. It seems that Hopper is still the only man capable of surviving on Lyoko.”

Jeremy said nothing. How much did Mago know about Hopper’s past? Did he know that by entering Lyoko, the professor had lost his body, transforming into pure energy?

“As it happens, young man, you’re the one who will be entering Lyoko. You will follow my instructions precisely and you will do me a little favour. The task will only take a moment, you’ll see. You just have to open a certain door for me.”

A door? Jeremy reeled before shaking his head.

“I’m very sorry,” he said, “but I can’t go to Lyoko.”

In reality, he had done so several times, but it had been an unpleasant and shameful experience that he hadn’t the slightest intention of repeating. It was clear that he wasn’t built to be a hero. He was much more talented at staying at the controls, guiding his friends through the virtual world.

Mago raised his head, and this time, two icy eyes peered out from under his hat, piercing Jeremy’s like daggers. His gold canine teeth shone in the gloom.

“I didn’t ask you to go to Lyoko,” he whispered. “I ordered you to. Otherwise, your girlfriend, who has already lost her

father, will lose the last of her family. And you don't want that to happen to Aelita, do you?"

"You..." Jeremy said, taking a step back. "...you'll assassinate Memory if I don't help you?"

Mago clapped his hands loudly against his thighs, brimming with satisfaction.

"I like you, kid. You understand everything the first time around."

The park at Kadic Academy was silent, the trees already warmed by the rosy morning sun. Yumi and Jim Morales slid the manhole cover to the side. Professor Hertz was waiting for them a few steps away, wearing a miner's helmet that she'd found goodness-knows-where and a large backpack.

"Perfect," puffed Yumi when the heavy metallic cover was dropped onto the tall grass, revealing the dark shaft leading to the sewers.

Jim cautiously sniffed the nauseating stench wafting from the pipe and shook his head.

"And you screwed around down there, escaping the dormitory in the middle of the night? The principal should expel you, not put you in control..."

"This is not the time, Jim," Professor Hertz tried to appease him. "We've got important work to do."

Yumi was the first one to head down into the darkness. She descended several metres, hanging onto the iron rungs embedded in the wall and being very careful not to slip.

When her feet could no longer find another rung, she understood that it was time to jump, and she let herself fall.

She landed not much further down with a *pauff*, and leapt to the side to avoid getting her shoes soaked in the wastewater. She took the torch from her belt and turned it on, projecting a cone of light along the sewer conduit. Their old skateboards and scooters were still leaning against one of the curved walls.

She heard someone cry “HELP!” and Jim fell down like a sack of potatoes, ending up landing with his legs in the air right in the middle of the pipe.

The teacher got up in a single jump and almost gave the impression of having bounced off the ground after his fall, but it was too late. His pants, jacket and shirt were covered in unnameable liquids.

“Disgusting!” he exclaimed. “And such a nasty odour... Gross!”

Hertz arrived not long after and made an elegant jump, not even wetting the toes of her shoes.

“We can get to Kadic’s boiler room that way,” Yumi said to Jim while signalling behind her. “And in front of us is the path to the old factory, which forks off a little further down, also leading to the Hermitage.”

Professor Hertz observed one of the walls attentively.

Yumi’s gaze followed the beam of light coming from her head torch. It illuminated the small brass plaque on which the words *Green Phoenix* could be read.

"Hmph..." the professor grumbled.

"Well, it all fits together, right?" Yumi said. "You and Hopper got help from Walter Stern, Ulrich's father, and when he bought the old factory, he constructed the pathways. I also find it funny that he used the symbol of the Green Phoenix to mark the entry and exit points of the labyrinth, and he didn't even know where the supercomputer was..."

Hertz smiled at her. It was as if the insufferable stench of the sewers didn't bother her at all.

"I wonder whether these tunnels are isolated from the rest of the city sewers," the professor thought aloud.

"Why?" Jim immediately asked, tired of being left out of the conversation.

"Because I really don't like the idea of soldiers being able to get close to my students, and Mago's men seem very good at fooling electronic alarms."

"But if it were possible to isolate this labyrinth from the rest of the city sewers..." Yumi commented, also beginning to smile. "And seeing as the river isn't far away..."

She may have understood the professor's plan. They exchanged a gesture of collusion.

Odd pressed on through the tall grass. Behind him were Michel Belpois, slightly hunched over, his tweed suit full of creases and a serious expression on his face. Richard, by his side, struggled under the weight of an enormous cardboard box carrying the materials necessary to deconstruct the

scanner. The young man was already covered up to his knees in mud.

“You’re sure you don’t want me to give you a hand?” Odd asked him.

“Yeah, I...I’m doing...couldn’t be better.”

“Sorry we couldn’t take the road, but I thought that it would be better to take a shortcut through the park. I don’t want to run into any surprises.”

Kadic’s park was separated from the Hermitage garden by a simple metal fence. They would pass through it using a large hole not far out of their way. Once they’d finished with the scanner, Odd had to remember to warn Hertz.

The boy walked a little faster between the trees, shivering from the intense cold. He arrived at the manhole and saw that it was open, revealing a vertical tunnel that became lost in the underground darkness. Yumi, Professor Hertz and Jim had already gone down to inspect the sewers. Excellent.

“This way,” he whispered.

A little more walking and the Hermitage was in sight.

Richard huffed, tripped on a tree root and almost dropped the box. He somehow managed to land without breaking anything and began to massage his sore arms.

“I need a break,” he said.

“No problem,” Odd responded, smiling. “I’ll scout ahead.”

He left Richard and Mister Belpois with a small wave and jumped to the other side of the bushes, ducking down like an apache explorer so as not to be seen. He cupped his ear. Not

far ahead, beyond the curtain of trees, a squeaky metallic noise could be heard.

Odd knelt down even further and advanced away from the thicket in silence. The muddy ground stuck to his shoes, multiplying the weight of each step. He jumped behind a fallen tree trunk. The speaking became louder and louder, coming right from the Hermitage.

The boy threw himself to the ground and began to crawl, digging his elbows in to advance, just like soldiers tend to do in films when they need to cross an entanglement of barbed wire. Not far away was a dry bush, which would serve as his refuge. He stuck his head through the branches, suppressing a whimper when the thorns clung to his hair, pulling forcefully on his scalp.

“Ow ow ow!” he whispered as quietly as he could.

The fence that separated Kadic from the Hermitage was gone. In its place stood a wall of metal planks that stood six or seven metres high, hiding the roof of the old chalet. The wall was only partially constructed and some soldiers in camouflage uniform were transporting several heavy planks of metal, welding them together with chains and a blowtorch. Each plank was marked with the symbol that Odd knew all too well.

“Well that’s just great... The Green Phoenix has found the Hermitage.”

Jeremy was in their hands, and now Ulrich, Eva and Aelita were too. Without the ones in the factory, the Hermitage

scanner was the only way of getting them out of the sand-boxes, and now they'd fallen right into the claws of X.A.N.A. and the terrorists.

At that moment, Odd heard a bout of furious barking. He bent to see better, and through the part of the wall that wasn't yet finished, he saw a man in jeans and a leather jacket, holding the leads of two enormous Rottweilers that were growling ferociously.

That had to be Grigory Nictapolus, the man who had hurt his father and his mascot, Kiwi. Odd gritted his teeth. He would have loved to have confronted him, even though he was unarmed. He began to crawl backwards, but the branches of the bush were tangled in his hair, and Odd had to violently jerk back several times.

"Ow!" he yelled before he could stop himself.

Grigory took two steps towards the bush, accompanied by his two beasts. He then stopped dead.

"Hey, you! Are you one of those snotty brats?" he said loudly.

Odd stopped breathing. He heard a crazy, icy laugh from the man.

"I don't want to chase you, although my dogs are a little hungry. I need you to take an important message to Major Steinback... What do you call her? Ah yes, Professor Hertz."

Grigory wanted to send Hertz a message?

"Tell her that the Hermitage is now our territory. The secret room as well. So don't do anything stupid, and if you

drive safely and respect the rules, we won't have to hurt you or your friends..."

The dogs pulled forcefully on their leashes, trying to run towards the bush Odd was hiding behind. They had picked up his scent and were sniffing the air greedily.

"Understand, kid?" the man shouted. "Respond or I'll have to come over there to make sure my message has gotten into your head."

Odd trembled and bit his lip.

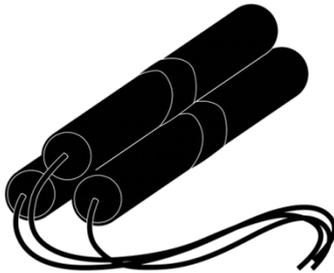
"I...yes," he then murmured. "Understood."

"Ah!" Grigory exclaimed. "This little voice belongs to Odd Della Robbia, doesn't it? Deliver my message, and...say hello to your old man for me."

The sinister man walked away with long and firm strides, dragging his two dogs along with him.

# 14

## THE BRIDGE TO LYOKO



Ulrich wound up at the plaza of the First City and looked all around him, alarmed. Eva Skinner had disappeared. He had left her right here, unconscious on the bright cobblestone, and now she was no longer there.

The boy planted himself in front of X.A.N.A. and closed his fists, ready to fight.

“Where is it?”

His enemy’s face lit up with a smirk.

“You mean Hopper’s ghost? We left it at the castle. The stupid recording wasn’t good for anything.”

“I’m not talking about Hopper, I’m talking about Eva’s body! You said that no-one would hurt her.”

“Ah, I see. I didn’t think it was wise to leave her here. My monsters love to play, and I wouldn’t want them to hurt her by mistake.”

“How sweet!” sighed Ulrich with sarcasm. “Where’d you put her?”

X.A.N.A. raised a finger and part of the pavement near the fountain in the plaza started to expand. At first, the smooth pavement only slightly buckled, but then, from it, the bubble grew and rose, in a way that reminded Ulrich of the top of a cracked egg. The object that came out seemed to him like some sort of galactic cradle.

The young man approached the strange object and the surface of the cradle became transparent before of his eyes. Ulrich stumbled. He was surprised and a bit scared at the same time. Eva was inside. Her eyes were closed and her blonde hair was laid out on a celestial blue pillow. It looked like an illustration of Sleeping Beauty. But X.A.N.A. was a computer. What would he know of fairy tales? Maybe this artificial intelligence was different from the emotionless monster that Ulrich had fought against a million times before on Lyoko. Now, X.A.N.A. seemed more...human.

“She’s sleeping...” he finally muttered.

“Very observant. Bravo,” the dark-haired young man replied while once again walking off and disappearing into an alleyway.

“Here they are!” he cried out not long after.

Ulrich hurried in his direction. The road seemed to be cut in half by a row of bricks as black as the muzzle of a wolf.

“Let’s go,” exclaimed X.A.N.A. as he began to head down the dark path.

Ulrich began to trot behind him, perplexed.

“Why does this black path interest you so much?” he asked him.

X.A.N.A. gave a sarcastic smile.

“Don’t you remember what Hopper’s recording said? The professor rebuilt the First City to try to prevent its potential use as a weapon, but realised that that wouldn’t be possible. So then he isolated it and put a guardian in place. Me.”

Ulrich nodded. He also remembered another thing that Hopper had told them. In the past, X.A.N.A. and Aelita had been friends. Was what he said serious?

“The city where we are now,” the young man continued from beside him, “is a closed-off space, completely separated from Lyoko. But...”

“But what?”

“There’s a channel that connects the two worlds. A long bridge suspended through the void that goes from the First City to Lyoko.”

Ulrich’s eyes grew wide. In an instant, he was frozen in fear.

“Hopper said that...” he stuttered. “That he had isolated the castle...”

X.A.N.A. nodded.

“See this row of bricks? Well, it connects the castle to the wall. And the wall is the barrier that divides the two worlds. When we arrived here, we opened a path through it. In this way, Lyoko and the First City will be united again.”

*And the castle will become a weapon again, thought Ulrich. And you could recover all of your power and destroy our world.*

He needed to stop him. Even though he hadn't the slightest idea how to do it.

Yumi finished unwinding the electric cable and attached it to the wall of the tunnel with some tape to keep it from ending up in the water. Then, she came to a vertical well that lead to the surface and attached the end of the cable to her belt.

“I'm here!” she called out.

When she had come here with Ulrich and the others in the past, they usually helped each other by joining hands to create a step way to reach the first iron support two metres up. But Ulrich was very far away now.

From the entrance of the well, Professor Hertz, who had come out several minutes before, sent down a large rope, attached it to a tree with a complicated knot, and then gave Yumi the go-ahead.

The young girl climbed it agilely until reaching the cold air at the surface. The electric cable that she had unwound

throughout the sewers swayed behind her, copying her momentum as if it were a very long tail.

Outside, the air was very crisp and was deliciously odour-free. Hertz had laid out a nylon canvas on the humid surface of the undergrowth to keep the material from getting wet. She was now sitting on the ground, at work with a big, black box and a pair of pliers.

Yumi detached the electric cable from her belt and gave it to the woman.

“Here,” she said. “I connected it to the command box in the maintenance room like you asked.”

“Good,” approved the professor. “And Jim?”

“He’s still down there. He’s finishing checking to make sure that the watertight doors were all shut right.”

Yumi sat in silence beside the professor, observing her hands as they worked with such precision and skill on...a bomb! Professor Hertz could simply create one like that, as if it were nothing special, using only simple materials from the laboratory and other things that she had gradually found here and there at the school.

*This isn’t Professor Hertz, the young girl remembered. In reality, she is Major Steinback, a special forces agent. She is an expert in explosives, and who knows how many other shady things...*

Yumi heard noises coming from underground. She leaned towards the dark well that led to the sewers and smiled. Jim Morales was trying to climb up, but he couldn’t coordinate

his movements between the rope and the supports and slipped again and again.

“Instead of just standing there and watching me,” the gym teacher panted, “you could give me a hand, you know.”

“But aren’t you an athlete?” the young girl joked with him.

“Yes, but... Hmm, I think I hurt my foot...”

“Ah, of course...”

Yumi gave him a hand, helping him to exit from the mouth of the sewers, then Jim gave them a quick report. He had checked over the sewers twice and everything was ready to go.

In the end, Professor Hertz was right. Whoever it was that constructed the underground tunnels that interconnected Kadic, the Hermitage and the old factory, had limited themselves to developing an underground system of conduits separate from the rest. There were watertight doors that isolated the tunnels at the school from the normal sewers in the city. This meant that the kids could shelter themselves from the men in black without the local area, or even the city, plunging into chaos.

“We’re ready,” Professor Hertz said.

Yumi nodded her head.

“Jim, help me put the sewer cover in place. I don’t want the river water to flood the sewers and turn the park into a lake.”

At that moment, a silhouette came out from the undergrowth. It was Odd.

“What happened to you?” asked Yumi. “You look like you saw a monster.”

“Yeah, that’s exactly what happened,” the boy confirmed. “And he left me a message for you. We lost Ulrich and Aelita. The Green Phoenix has taken over the Hermitage.”

The soldier roughly pulled Jeremy towards him and pushed him against one of the scanners.

“Now, I’m going to leave you, so don’t try anything stupid.”

The idea to try something stupid hadn’t even crossed Jeremy’s mind. Besides the one with him now, there were a lot of soldiers in the room, all armed with submachine guns, positioned so that they formed a circle around the scanners on the second underground floor.

Jeremy observed the scanners once more. The metal cylinders were connected to the ceiling through an abundance of tangled, multicoloured cables that seemed like the roots of some strange upside-down trees. He was about to enter Lyoko to help Green Phoenix. He would have liked to put up a fight, but he was alone and these men had Aelita’s mother in their power. And they were willing to hurt her.

The soldier fought several moments against the restraints, then Jeremy felt his blood start to run back through his veins again. He started to rub his wrists. His circulation had been cut off for so long that his fingers were now white and under a constant, uncomfortable sensation of pins and needles.

Jeremy put on a brave face and went ahead and approached the scanner. The sliding doors opened from the middle, unveiling a narrow, cylindrical cabin illuminated by an intensely bright light. As soon as he was inside, the door shut behind him and the scanner speakers transmitted Memory's voice to him.

"We're about to begin the transfer. You will appear on the desert sector of Lyoko, and you must head to the fifth sector. Then..."

"I know how it works," the young man abruptly interrupted her.

"In that case, let's get going. Virtualisation!"

Jeremy felt a push upwards, and he tossed his head back. A jet of hot air threw his hair towards the ceiling, and he began to have a strong sensation of vertigo.

He then found himself landing awkwardly, stumbling on the curved ends of his ridiculous, green slippers, and fell to his knees. He was having a rather hard time balancing. But this was a normal effect of being virtualised. It's difficult for one's eyes and body to adapt to the new world. And to their new appearance.

Just like Memory had said, he was in the desert sector. In front of him stretched a plateau of sand dotted by several dark-coloured rocks that stood out here and there amongst the flat, bare land. The sand was spread as far as the horizon in every direction without any dunes or any sort of variation

in the landscape. It was immediately apparent that this was a fake reality, far from the real world.

*Well, here I am again,* he thought with a sigh.

Jeremy had solemnly decided that he would never go to Lyoko again. That was until Hannibal Mago had forced him to change his mind.

“Oof...” he exhaled as he stood up.

The young man observed his slippers with their twisted tips, and his legs lined in tights. The rest of him wore a bright green leotard that also served as a short skirt, fitted to his waist with a belt, from which a dagger hung. He felt his face. His ears had grown, and there were tufts of hair coming from the tips. On his head he wore a silly, little, green cap that ended in a point with a small feather stuck through the fabric in one of its sides.

It was totally unfair. On Lyoko, Ulrich transformed into an expert samurai, and Odd, an extremely agile catboy. Jeremy, however, became an elf. A ridiculous green elf in tights.

A chilly wind began to blow through the trees in the park at Kadic, causing Yumi to shiver. The young girl watched her companions one by one: Odd, Jim Morales, and Professor Hertz, who had returned to her work on her device in absolute silence.

Yumi couldn't believe it. First Jeremy, and now Ulrich, Eva and Aelita. Only she and Odd were left to try and resolve the situation.

“So, what do we do now?” she muttered.

“We continue with our plan,” Hertz told her, raising her head for a moment to look her directly in the eyes.

“What plan?” asked Odd.

The woman ignored him. Then, she grabbed a small red cable with the pliers, its end peeled back to reveal the copper wires inside.

“Get ready,” said Hertz. “Three, two, one...”

She lightly connected the end of the cable to another inside the plastic case in front of her. There was a small spark.

“And the fuse is lit,” commented Yumi.

Not a moment later, the bomb exploded.

A roar could be heard surging underground, then a churning, and finally the noise of the water starting to flood in.

Yumi pressed the palms of her hands on the ground and felt the vibration through the ground. It had worked.

“The Kadic sewer system is isolated from the rest of the sewers in the city,” she explained upon seeing Odd’s perplexed face. “We just closed off the passageways that connected them directly to the factory, the Hermitage and the normal sewers.”

“Uh-huh...” nodded Odd.

“Professor Hertz found an area where one of the Kadic tunnels passed close by to a river and...we blew up the tunnel wall.”

“So, what you’re saying is YOU FLOODED THE SEWERS?”

“Exactly. We can no longer flush the toilets or take any showers, but at least we’ll be sure that Hannibal Mago’s soldiers can’t take us by surprise by coming in from right under our feet.”

“Wow!”

“Hey, you didn’t warn me about the showers!” said Jim Morales, while turning towards Professor Hertz with a worried expression on his face. “How in the world am I going to be able to get rid of all this stink?”

She gestured for him to be quiet.

“We need to return to the school immediately and study our plan for defence in detail. If I know Mago, he kidnapped Jeremy with a clear objective in mind: reopen the channels that link Lyoko to the First City. And in that case, you can bet we’ll be receiving some nasty surprises in the near future...”

Jeremy heard a snickering directly in his ear. He jumped, disoriented. It was as if someone had placed a little bird inside his ear canal and it was whispering inside. He then remembered that this was to be expected. For once, it was him on Lyoko and someone else was guiding him from the outside. Memory.

“Can you hear me?” he asked aloud.

He felt a bit stupid speaking all alone in the middle of a desert, but then the laughter stopped and he heard the woman’s voice.

“Yes, yes... Your new look is...very cute.”

Jeremy sighed, feeling dead inside.

“Forget it. What should I do?”

Memory didn't respond. Jeremy felt the terrain begin to vibrate, and the sand in front of him started to move, then began to sink, creating a menacing whirlpool.

Quicksand! The boy jumped back. It couldn't be caused by X.A.N.A. or his monsters, the artificial intelligence didn't have access to Lyoko.

“I opened a passage for you,” Memory's voice then said. “It should take you directly to the central core of Lyoko.”

Jeremy began to tremble. Memory wanted him to jump inside this sand vortex? He reflected back for a moment to what happened during the final battle against X.A.N.A. On this occasion, Hopper appeared as a sphere of energy and opened up a passageway to the heart of Lyoko. Aelita and Odd were in the ice sector, and the silver waterfall that was in front of them transformed into a well that led into darkness. The two children had jumped in without thinking twice, but they were athletic and agile. He, on the other hand...

*Enough of that, he said to himself. Whether I like it or not, I don't have a choice.*

Jeremy watched the sand under his feet. The whirlpool had become so large that it had transformed into a sort of yellow tornado that became lost in the depths of the earth.

The boy covered his nose, tried to muster up some courage, and jumped.

The desert enveloped him with millions of grains of sand as hard as rocks that scratched against his skin and clothes to the point of making him screech. The sand entered his mouth, stifling him while his body was completely carried away by the tornado of earth that became stronger and stronger the further it pulled him down.

He fell and fell, and when he finally felt the ground again, he reopened his eyes. He was in a place that he knew very well.

Jeremy was on a square platform. It was made of a smooth and hard material, and he could feel its cold surface through the soles of his elf slippers. All around him was the core of Lyoko, a cylindrical well with dark blue walls that went on forever and ever in all directions both above and below him. Jeremy experienced a wave of vertigo so powerful that it brought him to his knees.

In the past, it was precisely on this platform that Aelita had used her father's code to inject an antivirus straight into the virtual world's core, capable of destroying X.A.N.A. Hopper had sacrificed himself in order to ensure that his daughter could successfully carry out the mission.

*Here I am,* thought Jeremy. *Where everything began and where everything must end.*

"Now what?" he asked.

"There should be a bridge somewhere," Memory's voice responded several moments later, seeming a little unsure of

herself. “You need to cross it, then open the door you find on the other side.”

“There’s no bridge here! There’s just emptiness all around!” protested Jeremy.

“I see that, but um...” the voice interrupted him, unsteadily.

The boy approached the edge of the platform, leaned forward a bit to look down, then suddenly pulled himself back, frightened. The platform seemed to surge directly to the walls, and there were no doors or openings of any type. He was stuck.

Turning around, he saw that a luminous screen had appeared, suspended in the air. It was a slightly transparent rectangle that was floating more or less a metre above the platform. The screen was divided into two halves horizontally. On the topmost and clearer half, the word *CODE* was written. The second and more transparent half represented the average computer keyboard.

The boy touched the keys with a finger and on the screen appeared: *CODE: Q*.

Jeremy erased this letter. He needed to think what it was he should type. What could be the correct code to get out of this nightmarish place?

He felt the answer naturally make its way to the tips of his fingers. This place had been modeled by Professor Hopper. It was a gift for his daughter.

*CODE: A... E... L...* he started to type. *CODE: AELITA*.

The screen flickered twice and disappeared.

Jeremy's feet began to rise above the platform. The boy waved his arms, trying to maintain his balance, then became rigid as he felt an invisible force propel him towards the upper interior of the core. He was flying. The Code Aelita carried him into the sky.

# 15

## THE ROBOT ARMY



The wall surrounded the First City like an impenetrable barrier, black and opaque, that seemed to continue infinitely towards the sky until it was lost from sight.

Countless rows of bricks were perfectly arranged, presenting neither an opening nor the slightest crack.

Ulrich and X.A.N.A. had walked from one side to the other twice, following the city perimeter. It was no use: the wall had one sole gate and its enormous doors were tightly sealed. Even X.A.N.A.'s touch had no effect on them.

"Seems like there's no physical way to get past this wall," Ulrich declared triumphantly, when they found themselves by the enormous, impenetrable door for the second time.

They then sat on the footpath, in front of an empty shop. Many hours had passed since he'd been virtualised into the First City, and he was now hungry and tired.

X.A.N.A. slammed the wall with all his might. When he touched the black bricks, his fists became engulfed in blue electricity, like small artificial fires.

"It's impossible!" the artificial intelligence shouted. "We could get through here. Just here. This door opened on my command!"

Ulrich couldn't help but give a weak smile.

"Did you forget? We're in a closed environment. Lyoko is on the other side...and you can't reach it."

X.A.N.A. turned towards him. He reached his hands out as if he were grabbing air and an enormous curved scimitar with a blade as red as blood appeared out of nowhere. Ulrich jumped and leapt up, taking on a defensive pose.

"Don't mock me, human. I may not have gotten all my strength back, but I'm still the Guardian of the First City."

Ulrich softly nodded and X.A.N.A.'s scimitar disappeared as quickly as it had appeared, transforming into a cloud of black smoke that dissipated as it rose into the air.

"So what do we do now?" Ulrich asked him, not taking his eyes off his enemy.

X.A.N.A. gave him a mocking pout.

"You're forgetting that right now, a part of me is in the Mirror with Aelita. Hopper's journal is a perfect reproduction of certain days in June 1994. So perfect that it even includes

the factory and the river. And the scanners. And the super-computer.”

“So you’re saying that there’s a copy of Lyoko in the Mirror?” Ulrich exclaimed, eyes wide.

“Evidently, the Lyoko from 1994 and the authentic one, the one in present day, aren’t linked. But that doesn’t mean that I won’t be able to open a passage.

X.A.N.A. shrugged, impatient, and then placed a finger on his lips to tell Ulrich to keep quiet.

“Do you hear that?”

The boy approached the gigantic gate once again.

The flight along the edge of the well was rather quick, so much so that the walls seemed to darken, fusing into a single blurred, dizzying object. Jeremy gritted his teeth as the mysterious force of the Code Aelita carried him up high at an insane speed.

And then, without warning, the annoying blurred object disappeared. The boy shot out of the mouth of the well, directly towards the colourless sky like the cork from a bottle of champagne, and the air once again became calm and immobile. Jeremy felt himself fall down again; he tried to regain his balance but couldn’t manage, and fell flat on his face. He got back up on his feet, rubbing his nose.

A very long, silver bridge stretched out in front of him, floating above the void. Behind Jeremy was the well he had just exited: a dark blue cylinder whose end was out of eye-

sight, descending towards the nothingness and supporting one of the bridge arches. The other arch ended further on the horizon, where one could vaguely see the toweringly high black wall of the First City.

The bridge was flat with very low railings on each side. Jeremy leaned on the one closer to him and breathed deeply. His gaze meandered to the abyss below him and his whole body began to shake. This place defied all the laws of physics. It could only exist in a virtual world such as Lyoko.

*Don't pay attention to what your eyes are telling you, the boy said to himself. What you see is only a computer program. The endless void beneath your feet isn't real, and the sky...the sky can't be like that!!*

He forced himself to take a step and almost tripped over on the twisted ends of his horrible elf slippers. He took a breath and looked around him. He took another step. That worked.

Jeremy began to run along the bridge.

He stopped when he'd ran more or less three quarters of the way. The endless voids that ran around Lyoko were already far away, and in front of him something had grown even bigger, submerging him in its gigantic mass as he approached: the wall of the First City, so black that it absorbed all light and so tall that its top could not be seen.

"What happened?" Memory's voice came to him, transmitted right into his own ear.

“Look,” he said, centring his gaze on a strange object attached to the railing.

It was a small, transparent crystal cage, one side of which lay over the edge of the bridge, above the abyss. It was attached to the railing with a bolt, also acting as an axis it could turn on, and contained three antique-looking keys.

Jeremy carefully observed them. The first was dark and ended in teeth that made up the shape of a gun. The second was purple and its head formed the shape of a musical note. The third was a massive golden key, encrusted with precious stones.

“Three keys,” Memory commented.

“A riddle,” Jeremy confirmed.

The boy remarked that the floor of the crystal cage could be slid to the side, freeing the keys. Due to the way it rotates, only one of the keys would fall onto the bridge, while the others would slide out the other side, being lost forever.

“It’s a test,” he affirmed. “I need to choose the right key, or we won’t be able to open the door to the First City.”

He wondered for a moment if he could choose the incorrect one on purpose. Doing so would mean the Green Phoenix couldn’t get into the First City, and X.A.N.A. couldn’t return to Lyoko. But if he failed, Hannibal Mago could send someone else into the virtual world to take his place. Maybe one of his friends. Jeremy was convinced that if another person were to come here, the keys would reset to the way they

were before, like when you start a video game from the beginning. And so, he had to win this game. No matter what.

“Hurry up!” Mago’s voice suddenly demanded, hurting his eardrum. “Take the key!”

“Yes, but...which one?” he asked, indecisive.

“Well the gun-shaped one, obviously. The First City is a weapon, that key must be the right one.”

“And why not the golden one?” Jeremy argued. “The City could bring you great wealth, couldn’t it?”

The boy moved swiftly. He turned the crystal cage until he found what seemed to him to be the right key and opened the door, letting it slide towards him. The object he had chosen fell to his feet, while the two others slipped into the void and seemed to disappear in the darkness.

“What did you do, stupid boy?” it was Mago again, yelling like a madman. “You’re going to pay for that!”

Jeremy leaned down to pick up the remaining key, the purple one whose head was shaped like a musical note.

“Don’t worry. This one will open the door.”

It seemed obvious. It was another one of Hopper’s ways of ensuring that only Aelita could resolve this riddle. The girl had always loved music. In the video the professor had left at the Hermitage, Jeremy saw her seated at the piano, still as a young child, playing on the white and black keys. And what’s more, once at Kadic, she had proven herself to be an excellent DJ. Musical notes: a good, clean invention to neutralise the First City.

Jeremy attached the key to his belt and began to run towards the wall. The time to end this had come.

Ulrich pressed his ear to the wall, ignoring the static electricity that enveloped his head. They were a little scary, but not harmful. They didn't even tickle.

"You're right," he then admitted, "I can hear noises. Sort of like footsteps..."

"...from someone arriving on the other side," X.A.N.A. finished for him, placing his hands on the immense door and pushing as hard as he could. But the door didn't budge even a millimetre. "Nothing. I can't open it and I can't even tell who could be on the other side."

Ulrich thought that it was a really great question. Who could it be?

Maybe Aelita, having found a passage from the Mirror. Or worse, it could be someone from the Green Phoenix, a terrorist. Or maybe it was Hannibal Mago in person.

"X.A.N.A.," he said, "has it occurred to you that whoever is on the other side could be an enemy? And that we're unarmed?"

The young man glanced at him briefly, and burst out in loud laughter.

"What are you talking about? Once this door opens, I can return to Lyoko and defragment my strength. I'll reunite with the part of me that's still locked in the Mirror, and after that, I'll have no enemies. Only my slaves."

Ulrich couldn't manage a reply. X.A.N.A. looked him, his expression a mixture of indifference and compassion.

"But," he murmured, "if you feel safer that way..."

Suddenly, the weapon Ulrich always carried on Lyoko appeared in his hands: his Japanese sword, a katana.

"Wow!" he exclaimed. "Thank you!"

"Well, you might need it... Look," the other responded, pointing to the door, where a luminous screen had appeared.

On the screen, an *A* appeared. Then an *E*. And an *L*.

"Aelita," Ulrich whispered.

When his friends name finished writing itself, a sound like fire crackling in a fireplace could be heard. The enormous black door dissolved, transforming into a snow of glowing cinders.

On the other side of the door appeared a strange boy dressed like an elf. He had a truly ridiculous appearance, with his hairy ears and pointed cap with a feather sticking out of one side.

When Ulrich recognised him, he leapt on the boy and hugged him.

"Jeremy! How are you?"

"I'm g-good, thanks. And you?"

The two friends separated and exchanged a gushy handshake.

"Not too bad. Could be worse. I've got loads of things to tell you. And X.A.N.A..."

Ulrich suddenly turned away. He hadn't seen him go through the door, whether running, flying, transforming into smoke, or anything. But he had disappeared.

X.A.N.A. had escaped.

The creature fluctuated in the air like a translucent cloud of smoke. And in a fraction of a second, he had traversed the bridge leading to Lyoko and entered the deep well that used to contain his operational core. The same one the children had destroyed.

But he could now repair it.

X.A.N.A. spread his mental tentacles out into the four sectors of Lyoko, filling them with monsters and taking control of all the towers. All the parts of himself that had been dispersed onto computers all over the world as small fragmented backups returned home, and he began to recompose them like miniscule pieces of a gigantic jigsaw puzzle.

*Operational level: 80%*

X.A.N.A. executed a scan of the network, testing the connections and the levels of security on the two sandboxes it contained, the Mirror and the First City.

The City was now open, the castle fully available to him. But...

*Operational level: 90%*

...the part of him that was in Hopper's journal with Aelita was still trapped. He could now communicate with it, but they could not reunite.

*That is of little importance. It's nothing but a database, in the end. I don't need it to reach maximum power.*

X.A.N.A. ignored the problem and decided to harvest the final fragments of himself, recomposing his memories and preparing himself. And finally...

*Operational level: 99%*

The process was halted, and X.A.N.A., although he had no voice at that moment, screamed.

Why? Why couldn't he complete his reconstruction?

He began working an auto-diagnostic program, analysed the results and understood.

Aelita and X.A.N.A. were seated in the Hermitage kitchen. Taking advantage of the infinite amount of food in the fridge, the young girl had prepared a nice meal. She had already gone through the whole Mirror with X.A.N.A. at least twice, listening again and again to the discussions her father had with Professor Hertz, and especially talking a lot to her strange new friend. She finally began to understand more about her past. Her father had escaped from Project Carthage, and, to try and neutralise it, had built the First City. For this, he had programmed Lyoko to act as a protective barrier, and had given the First City a guardian, X.A.N.A.

This creature wasn't human, but her father had allowed it to spend lots of time with his daughter in order to teach it the difference between right and wrong. And, despite the fact that Aelita remembered nothing from this time, she felt that

it had somehow worked: Richard had revealed that when they went to school together, he was jealous of a mysterious friend that she had called Mister X. X as in X.A.N.A.

But the girl still didn't understand what had happened after that. Did her father discover that something wasn't working? But why? Everything was so complicated...!

At that moment, Aelita nibbled on some potatoes from a plate that was already becoming transparent.

"What are you thinking about?" X.A.N.A. cheerfully asked her.

"About...before..." she responded. "When we went to visit Kadic. I saw Richard when he was my age, and all my old classmates. I don't remember them, and that seemed... weird, that's all."

"But it's funny too!" the boy exclaimed. "We're like ghosts, we can go where we want, and nobody can see us or tell us off..."

He stopped suddenly. His eyes remained glued to the ceiling, motionless, completely dark.

"Hey! Is everything ok?" Aelita asked, distracted, brushing his fingers.

"Yes," X.A.N.A. responded, smiling. "I've just completed a data transfer. Your friend Jeremy opened the door in the wall of the First City, and so I...I mean, the other part of me, was able to return to Lyoko. He's busy reconstructing his operational core."

“Oh,” said Aelita. “Does that mean something will change for us?”

“Maybe so,” X.A.N.A. whispered, gently grabbing her arms. “If you want to help me.”

“What do you mean?”

Aelita and the boy’s eyes met. X.A.N.A.’s eyes were shining brightly.

“I realised that something wasn’t working,” he said. “It’s hard to explain. I haven’t yet finished all the subroutines in my programs, and, as a result...well to put it briefly, it’s complicated. But it seems that I’ve finally understood what I want more than anything else. Which is stopping me from reaching one hundred percent of my capacity.”

“What is it?”

“I want to become...human.”

X.A.N.A. grinned and stood up on the chair, then the table, trampling on the remains of the food, which turned to smoke.

“Yes, human!” he exclaimed. “That’s why I felt so unhappy and incomplete before. But by being with you, I’ve understand what I’m truly lacking. I need to turn myself into a true human being. Think about it: this way, I would be the Guardian of Lyoko, just like your father wanted, and we could get rid of those Green Phoenix guys. Lyoko would become a world for just the two of us! You and me! And your friends too, if you want! We would be together!”

Aelita observed him, not knowing what to say, and felt an almost painful shiver rise from her wrists up into her arms and shoulders, finally reaching her throat.

X.A.N.A. couldn't become human! If there were a way to do it, her father would have known. But she remembered nothing and her father was dead.

The boy realised that something was wrong. He sat down again and warmly took her hands with his own.

"Will you help me? Do you promise that you'll help me become human?"

Aelita had a moment of hesitation, and then slowly shook her head.

"I would love to, really I would," she murmured. "But...I don't think it would be possible."

Silence fell on the two children, filling the room like a waterfall of ice.

X.A.N.A. stood and walked around the room, stopping at the kitchen door.

"Where are you going?" the young girl asked him, alarmed.

"I don't know," he responded quietly. "If you don't want to help me, it doesn't matter. I'll find someone else to do it. The weapon of the First City is now in my hands, and I'm sure that the Green Phoenix will be more than happy to ally with me."

That was all it took to make Aelita fall from her chair. She reached for the boy and tried to grab his arm.

“What are you talking about?! Stop! Please! Let’s talk about this!”

But all she grasped in her hands was a small plume of smoke.

In the first underground level of the factory, Memory was seated at the control terminal. From the moment Jeremy opened the door linking Lyoko to the First City, the monitors in front of her had gone crazy.

On the woman’s left, the holographic projector showed the world of Lyoko like a mixture of various colours: green for the forest sector, yellow for the desert, white for the ice sector and dark brown for the mountains. The map was now populating itself: all over the place, countless red markers had appeared, indicating towers, and other moving markers that flagged creatures. What was going on?

Grigory Nictapulus stood waiting behind Memory, occasionally stroking his dogs distractedly.

“What does all that mean?” he asked at one point, pointing to the third screen on the terminal, which was full of various patterns and data.

“Impossible,” Memory murmured after glancing at the screen.

The woman began to hammer at the keyboard in an almost savage rage, skimming through pages all over the place.

“It’s a report,” she said finally. “It shows the possible uses, both peaceful and militant, of the First City. Everything we can possibly do with the castle.”

“Such as...?”

“Well, the towers can be used to control any kind of electric or electronic device. Anywhere in the world.”

Memory turned to Grigory and saw a worrying expression had appeared on his face.

“And then there’s transportation,” the woman continued reluctantly. “Say there’s a scanner column in the United States. Someone could enter Lyoko from here, in France, and come out in the United States in a fraction of a second. Travel time and costs are practically reduced to zero.”

For a moment, the two were silent.

Grigory considered that the value of this application was incalculable: moving troops from one side of the world to the other in the blink of an eye; commercial trafficking; industrial use; business. It was a veritable goldmine.

“It also talks about materialising virtual creatures,” Memory added. “In other words, that it’s possible to create new beings in Lyoko, and then have them enter reality through the towers.”

“What else does the report say?” Grigory asked after audibly gulping.

“There’s a letter for Hannibal Mago.”

“I’ll go tell him,” said the man, straightening up and forcefully grabbing his dogs’ double leash.

Hannibal Mago sat on the chair at Memory's control terminal and played with the rings that covered his fingers.

"You're sure this isn't a trick?"

"We don't know who wrote the file and this letter," Memory responded, "but it's clear that it wasn't one of the children. It came directly from inside Lyoko. And, apparently, whoever sent it can control the virtual world.

"Excellent."

Hannibal Mago moved the brim of his hat away from his eyes and began to read.

The letter was quite brief.

*Dear Mister Mago,*

*Although you don't know me, I know everything about you. I know how much money and how much time you have invested in the Lyoko project, and I'm up-to-date on all the information collected by Grigory Nictapolus. For example, I could easily tell you the true identity of the woman you have named Memory.*

*As for myself, you can call me X.A.N.A. Or Guardian.*

*So as not to bore you, I shall get straight to it. The file I have sent you shows what I know about Lyoko, the First City and the castle, and I know how to use them. If you wish, I would be honoured to grant you access to them.*

*As you may have guessed, I would like to request something in exchange for my help. I would like to have but one wish fulfilled: to leave this computer and become human.*

*If you accept to help me, to secure our little agreement I would be more than able to set the castle to work and materialise a small army of robot soldiers into reality, using the factory scanners. This army will obey your orders, and will be of great help to you. For example, you could attack Kadic Academy. Also, it could be that you didn't know...*

Mago calmly finished reading the letter, evaluating the information it contained and nodding to himself.

Help this X.A.N.A. become human? He hadn't the slightest idea what that meant, but ultimately, he didn't care. The important thing was the castle! The First City!

And, seeing what the letter said, Kadic Academy as well.

Mago reread the last line on the screen: *if you choose to accept this agreement, go down to the second underground floor to welcome your new soldiers. Sincerely, X.A.N.A.*

The boss of the Green Phoenix smiled. He rested his fingers on the keyboard and wrote: *Dear friend, materialise the soldiers directly into the Hermitage. The chalet is now under my control.* He then took the computer mouse in his right hand. *Click.*

# 16

## THE BATTLE OF KADIC



Jeremy carefully observed the solid, black hexagonal building.

“It’s the virtual projection of an advanced computing core that directly relies on the multi-core processors of the Super-computer...” he explained to Ulrich.

“Hahahaha!”

“May I ask what’s so funny?” the boy snapped at his friend, embarrassed, while turning to face him.

“No, it’s nothing...” responded Ulrich, wiping the tears from his eyes. “It’s just that it’s hilarious watching an elf talk like a mad computer scientist!”

Jeremy sighed in defeat. It wasn’t his fault that he looked so ridiculous on Lyoko.

The boy approached the castle and brushed its dark surface. He observed the sparks that enveloped his hands, tickling them slightly.

“A firewall,” he noted. “The city wall is the system’s firewall, leading to the castle and completely surrounding it.”

“And that means what?” asked Ulrich.

“Hopper tried to protect Lyoko from the First City. When the firewall is active, the computer core for the castle can’t be used,” Jeremy explained to him.

“But the wall is open now.”

Jeremy gave his friend a sad look.

“Yeah. And I don’t know what will happen.”

A flash of light suddenly blinded their eyes. The castle wavered for a moment like the screen of a television set filled with static.

“What happened?” cried Ulrich.

“Uh-oh...” murmured Jeremy.

He touched the wall again, and the black shell of the firewall again disappeared, though for a bit longer this time. Then, the castle walls seemed to vibrate with a dull hum.

“Do you hear that too?” he asked Ulrich.

“Yeah, a sound like the machinery in a factory,” the boy said while nodding his head.

“It’s not machinery. The castle is a virtual structure, remember? No, the problem is the firewall. Someone is hacking it. Our dear friend X.A.N.A. is currently destroying the protection that Hopper created!” exclaimed Jeremy upon

seeing Ulrich's confusion. "He's about to use the castle! And we have no way of stopping him!"

The sky became dark and menacing. A blue bolt of lightning struck the castle at its highest tower, shaking it at its foundation, and a cascade of meandering sparks fell from the building to the ground of the First City, dispersing in all directions.

The two boys were swept off their feet, but Ulrich managed to get to his knees and grab Jeremy by the arm.

"Come on!" he cried out. "We need to get out of here!"

Another lightning bolt struck the castle, but this time, the static effect lasted longer. The structure was covered in a shower of sparks, continuously changing colours from black to red to a bright white.

Jeremy crawled back on all fours without losing sight of what was happening in front of them. Ulrich pointed a small wall out to him, and the two children dashed behind it. All around them, tiny sparks crackled like small snakes that weaved under their clothes, causing them unbearable stings.

Jeremy raised his head above where they were hiding to glance around. The castle in front of them had changed. The black surface that had covered it was gone, and the castle was now of the same light blue as the rest of the structures in the city. The rows of black bricks had also disappeared. One last lightning bolt surged into the building, then the dense storm cloud dispersed as quickly and as unexpectedly as it had arrived, leaving the sky its usual indefinable colour.

“Look at that!” Ulrich exclaimed. “Things seem a lot more calm now, don’t they?”

“Maybe in appearance, but the castle is now operational. Whatever will happen with it, we’re about to find out...”

It only took two minutes for them to get their answer. A part of the wall that was just in front of them separated itself from the rest, inclining more and more to meet up with the road. It was anchored in place with large, dark chains and resembled the drawbridge of a real castle.

The two boys started to hear a slow, rhythmic noise. It sounded like...

“...footsteps,” said Ulrich.

“Soldiers marching,” nodded Jeremy with a grave expression on his face.

The robots stood more than two metres tall and were incredibly robust. They wore bronze armour similar to that of medieval knights – a complex design of shiny plates and joints – wearing dark iron masks on their heads with a row of small, yellow lights instead of eyes. From the top of their helmets spouted long cables that lead to electrical plugs, winding about in the air like tentacles.

“There’s a lot of them.”

“I count at least forty or so, and more keep coming.”

The robots were marching with stiff legs, goose-stepping in a martial fashion. They exited the drawbridge in compact

lines and strolled decisively down a street that wove between houses.

Suddenly, Ulrich's face lit up.

"Look," he exclaimed, excited. "They're going toward the wall, but they're taking the roads on the ground, not in the air. It's going to take them a long time... We can beat them and close the door before they get there!"

"But they'll see us!" protested Jeremy.

"They won't even notice us. Can't you tell?" he said to his friend with a smirk on his face. "They look pretty stupid."

The two boys left from behind the wall and ran towards the golden road that rose towards the sky, surrounding the castle.

They quickly passed by Hopper, who was still immobile. The image of the professor was frozen in an amusing position with his index finger out, signalling something below him. He looked like a toy whose batteries ran out of juice.

"Are you sure about this, Ulrich?" Jeremy questioned, worriedly. "We're going in the opposite direction."

"Watch this!"

Ulrich jumped unbelievably high and far. He landed gracefully on the second floating road, the one that was ruby red, and looked back down towards Jeremy.

"Just do what I did!" he called out to his friend.

"But I'm not able to..."

"It's easy. It's like having rockets on the bottoms of your shoes. You just have to give it a try!"

Jeremy obeyed. He bent his knees as much as he could, then jumped up. He couldn't stop himself from crying out as his body projected itself towards the sky with such disproportionate force. He miscalculated his trajectory and passed over the red road where Ulrich was waiting for him. But his friend must have figured he'd do something of the sort, because he jumped as well and caught him with his hand mid-jump and pulled him down to a safe landing.

Ulrich burst out laughing.

"I told you it was easy, champion. You just have to practise a bit."

They both began to run again on the translucent ribbon road that crossed the First City. Jeremy listened as the marching of the robots resonated between the buildings in an obsessive rhythm. The boy started to feel nauseous. He was the one who had opened up the passageway. If these monsters came to destroy the real world, it would be all his fault!

"The bridge that heads to Lyoko is that way," Ulrich pointed out to him without slowing down. "But..."

Suddenly, the two children froze in place.

The wall that surrounded the First City had disappeared. It had disintegrated. They could see the suspended bridge, and further out, the cylinder that gave access to the core of Lyoko. Everything else appeared to be a digital void. The city was an island of homes, parks and streetlights levitating in the air.

“We’ve lost,” said Jeremy, falling onto the road, completely disheartened.

The army from the castle crossed the streets and avenues below towards the bridge, and the first robots began to cross it with great strides.

“They’re getting away!” cried Ulrich, releasing a few aimless punches, furious.

Jeremy gave him a scornful look.

“And what good’s that supposed to do? You want to take on an entire army by yourself? Unfortunately, there’s nothing we can do to stop them.”

Ulrich sat by his side. The two children stayed there contemplating what to do about the army that was parading through the First City, disappearing as they marched towards Lyoko.

Odd’s watch emitted a beep, and the screen instantly lit up. *23:59* changed to *00:00*. A new day was beginning. But this Sunday was not like the rest.

The boy readjusted the metal strainer on his head, took a small, slightly flattened piece of bread out of his pocket, removed it from its wrapping and began to munch on it. Eating woke him up some more.

“Stop making noise, Odd,” whispered Yumi. “First the watch, and now you’re crunching away!”

“And put away that strainer,” echoed Sissi Delmas, the principal’s daughter. “You look ridiculous.”

Richard observed the young girl, a lot smaller than him, and quickly put away the pan he had been wearing on his head for a helmet. Odd laughed.

The four kids were in the Kadic park. They had been on watch for a long time now, keeping an eye on the silent trees and the muddy grass, but no-one wanted to change shifts before three in the morning.

That afternoon, after having spoken with Dido, who was still with the men in black across the ocean, principal Delmas and Professor Hertz had declared war. Everyone at the school took shelter, and they had at least some form of defence. They had formed patrol groups: one adult for three kids, all ready to sound the alarm.

Richard, who was 23 years old, even though he resembled a scared, little puppy, had been considered an adult.

After having helped prepare their defences, Odd had a headache and felt exhausted. Yumi was also exhausted.

Sissi, the principal's daughter, was wearing a violet faux fur coat, which was already completely covered in mud. The young girl was unbearable and rather snobby, but she needed to grin and bear it. They were at war, and they needed to fight.

"In the case of an attack, do you think they'd...come through here?" asked Richard, whispering.

"It's very probable," responded Yumi, pointing to the trees. "The wall that surrounds the school is resistant, but the Hermitage is at this end. And they are the ones who built

the barrier separating it from the park. So, they could remove it whenever they want.”

Odd finished eating his small piece of bread and balled up the colourful wrapper, then putting it in his pocket.

“But we still have the trap,” he murmured next, confidently.

His hands still hurt from all the work it had taken for him to make it, and they had to cover the hole with branches so that it wouldn't be visible.

“Do you really think this hole can stop a bunch of heavily-armed soldiers?” Yumi reprimanded him.

“With a bit of luck, it could give us the necessary time to sound the alert,” said Richard, helping him out.

The silence returned, only interrupted by Sissi, who sniffled from time to time. It was freezing cold, and small clouds of their breath seemed to form whenever they opened their mouths. Furthermore, it was pitch black outside. No one could see anything. Odd checked his watch again. It was only fifteen minutes past midnight. Only several minutes had passed. Then... *boom*.

Yumi motioned for them to remain silent, approached Odd so that he could see her mouth, and spoke silently, “It's not a noise. It's a vibration.”

*Boom, boom, boom.*

Without saying a word, the boy lay down on the ground and pressed his ear against the wet grass. His friend was

right. The earth was vibrating with rhythmic steps like those of an army.

Odd jumped to his feet, sunk the strainer onto his head, and grabbed his weapon: a wooden broom handle.

“Richard!” he exhaled. “Take the phone and sound the alarm!”

Sissi leapt up.

“The alarm?” the young girl cried with a screech. “The alarm? Why?”

“Shut it!” Yumi ordered her, grabbing her by the arm and pulling her behind herself.

They withdrew towards the reassuring silhouette of Kadic, while Richard pressed on the buttons of his phone to get in contact with Hertz.

“We don’t have time,” exclaimed Odd, tugging him by the coat. “We need to get out of here.”

“W-why?”

“Because it probably wouldn’t be a good idea to stay and keep them company.”

The boy pointed towards the shrubbery in front of them, and Richard looked to see the robots. At that, they began to run with their hearts in their throats until they lost their breath.

The first robots, of which there were about twenty or so, exited from between the bushes, marching in compact lines of three.

“They don’t seem...to be armed,” huffed Richard while running.

“Yeah,” noted Odd. “But they seem just as dangerous.”

The young boy left the others to run ahead while he slowed down to better observe the approaching monsters. They were coming from the woods in the park and marching towards the main pathway that headed towards the Kadic buildings.

*Let’s see just how tough they are,* thought Odd while extending his arm with the broomstick in hand. He gathered a bit of momentum, then threw his weapon with all his might as if it were a javelin.

The broom handle flew through the darkness and landed with a thud against the metallic head of the first giant automaton. The creature didn’t even seem hurt, nor did it slow down, but the small lights on its helmet went from yellow to red.

“Way to go,” cried Yumi. “Now you made it angry.”

“It was just a test,” Odd justified himself.

The soles of his shoes smashed into the gravel of the pathway, and the boy hurried his pace, catching up to Yumi.

“We should split up,” he suggested. “You and Sissi should go to the dorms and raise the alarm. Richard and I will try to join up with our parents and the principal in the administration offices.”

“Got it. Come on, Sissi, let’s go.”

Yumi grabbed Sissi's fur coat by the sleeve and pulled her to the side, while the boys ran straight to the doors of the main Kadic building, where the lights were on. Odd heard the sound of the steps coming from behind him change their pace and, without slowing down, threw a glance over his shoulder.

The lines of the soldiers divided in perfect order: the first line followed him and Richard, the second one advanced towards Yumi and Sissi, and the third was continued in their direction, the fourth turned to follow the girls, and so on.

“Did you see that?” he gasped.

“I'm starting to get a bad feeling about all this,” nodded Richard with a frightened look on his face.

Jim Morales was keeping watch in front of the dorms. The gym teacher was wearing a protective mask like those worn by baseball catchers and was holding a very modern, aluminium bow in his right hand with a series of pulleys on its ends.

Disguised like this, he resembled an alien that had recently come out of a sports shop, and despite the current frenzy, Yumi couldn't help but give a little laugh.

Sissi, provoked by fear, outran the young girl in a few strides.

“Alert, alert! The monsters are coming!” she started to cry as soon as she could see Jim under the glow of the school's fluorescent lights.

Without a doubt disoriented by the fur coat covered in mud and the crazy expression on the young girl's face, overcome with emotion, he took Sissi for a wild bear. He seized the bow tightly, clipped the end of the arrow to the cord and pulled it back. Then, he aimed at the girl.

Yumi threw herself to the ground like she had learned in judo class and took Sissi down with her. But she worried for nothing. The arrow snapped off the bow with a *ping* and, not a moment later, fell at the gym teacher's feet with a sad *plop*.

Jim looked all around him, trying to understand what went wrong with his athletic demonstration.

Yumi, in the meantime, stood and pushed Sissi with all her might towards the entrance of the dorms.

“Quick, Jim, they're coming! We need to get back inside and shut ourselves in!”

The cables on the heads of the robots had already started to appear from within the trees, swaying like seaweed. Yumi saw her teacher's eyes open wide behind his baseball mask. She made it over to him with one last jump and pushed him inside, closing and locking the large door behind her. She looked all around her, spotting the fire alarm near the light switches and moving towards it. She broke the class that was protecting the red button with her elbow and pressed it forcefully. The dorms were rattled by the rhythmic sounds of the alarm.

“The other students,” said Yumi taking Jim by the arm, “are they all here?”

“Yes, upstairs with Walter Stern and your parents.”

“Perfect. Let’s prepare our line of defence.”

The main entrance at Kadic was being watched by Professor Hertz and Odd’s father, whose lantern left dim circles of light in the darkness. The professor was, for once, not wearing her usual laboratory coat and was dressed in an old pair of jeans and a camouflage-print military jacket. She looked so different that Odd had to pause for a moment to recognise her.

As he and Richard approached at full speed, Robert Della Robbia’s lantern turned towards them.

“Son!” the man cried.

Odd didn’t bother to reply. The robots were closing in on him.

Robert and Professor Hertz reacted with precision and composure.

The man raced up the stairs that led to the main building, kicking the door open all the way so that the young boys could take refuge inside. In the meantime, Hertz gathered up a large, dark sack and emptied the small red and blue plastic balls from it.

“Watch out!” she cried while throwing one of the blue objects at the robots chasing them.

Odd ducked to avoid the projectile, which flew over his head and hit the helmet of one of the robots close by. The

cylinder exploded with a small noise, and the air became suffocating.

“Smoke bombs!” coughed Richard.

“Right,” hollered Hertz. “And the red ones are full of acid, so be careful when you throw them.”

The two young boys reached the professor and began to help her with the attack: a red ball for every two blue ones.

The robot army didn’t take a long time to vanish, enveloped in thick smoke. At one point, Hertz called for them to retreat inside the building.

Odd was the last to enter and turned the key, which was already in the keyhole.

“How did you manage to prepare these bombs?” he asked, pressing his nose against the glass door.

“Well, for the smoke bombs, it was easy enough. All I had to do was mix a bit of sugar, honey and potassium nitrate. For the acid bombs, on the other hand...”

“Look,” Richard interrupted them.

The robots exited the smoke one by one. The compact line of robots had been scattered, and they were now in disarray. The armour of some of the robots had been stained by the acid, but they didn’t seem to have sustained any serious damage.

“We need to get out of here,” said Robert, placing a hand on his son’s shoulder.

Odd nodded his head.

“We can head past the office and then take the side door out to the labs. I didn’t see any robots on that end.”

“What about the dorms?” the professor asked apprehensively.

“Yumi already went there, but...she was followed.”

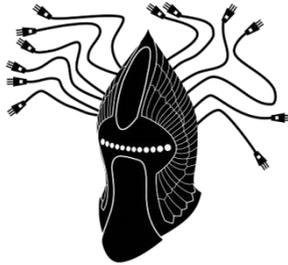
The boy paused for a moment to observe the robots that were accumulating in front of the entrance. The creatures remained immobile for a while, then the one at the front extended one of its arms, breaking through the glass as if it were nothing but tissue paper.

The helmets of the rest of the robots glowed red, and all together, they began to bang wildly against the door, reducing it to pieces.

They had no mouths, so they acted in total silence. All that could be heard was the relentless thuds of their fists against the metal and glass.

# 17

## RETREAT!



The large dormitory door had only held for a few minutes before the robots had succeeded in breaching it. They had then occupied the first floor, while the students were holed up on the second storey with the Ishiyamas and Ulrich's father, Walter.

"I'm going downstairs..." Yumi whispered after giving her mother a hug to reassure her, "to do some reconnaissance."

Nobody tried to hold her back: they were all too scared. The students of Kadic, spread out along the corridor, stared fixedly at her with eyes puffy from sleep, pale as ghosts.

*They aren't ready, Yumi thought. They've never been to Lyoko, and they've never fought X.A.N.A. I can't rely on anyone but myself.*

The girl covered herself down to her eyebrows in the hood of her favourite sweatshirt and turned to the staircase landing. She then took several steps, glued to the staircase railing, and looked down.

A robot was coming along the corridor with steady steps. Looking at it in decent lighting, Yumi noticed a detail that had escaped her until now: it had a plaque on the left side of its chest that bore a symbol that looked like a stylised eye, made up of circles and small lines. Yumi knew it all too well. It was the eye of X.A.N.A.! The robots were creatures of Lyoko!

The automaton arrived at the first step of the staircase, and then turned around and began to walk back down the corridor in the opposite direction, like a soldier making a round.

Yumi realised that its armour now seemed thinner, almost transparent. She could see the reflection of the fluorescent lights through the colossus, as if it had transformed into a translucent ghost.

The robot suddenly stopped in the middle of the corridor and its strange head full of yellow lights began to turn, searching for something. After spotting a power outlet near the floor, the giant approached and its hair grew down to its feet. As soon as one of its own plugs reached the floor, it slipped into the socket. A yellowish electric charge jolted through the robot, which immediately began to look more solid.

Yumi smiled. So these monsters had a weakness... They needed electricity. And she knew exactly where the school fuse box was: in the basement of the administration building. She had to tell Odd and Richard.

An iron hand smashed through the door of Professor Hertz's office. It wavered for an instant, then drew back, grabbing the handle and trying to turn it. Locked.

"Oh no, no, no..." Odd murmured. "It's all over."

He and Richard were alone in the room. His father and the professor had already sought refuge in the science laboratories. But the boy had insisted on stopping off at the office. He wanted to make sure the Code Down dossier was safe.

Pressing the folder overflowing with papers against his chest, Odd began to tell himself that, all things considered, this probably hadn't been a very smart idea.

"How are we going for bombs?" he asked Richard.

"We've only got one smoke one left."

"Take it and get ready."

Since it wasn't possible to open the door in a more polite manner, the robot decided to use a more hasty method. An armoured humanoid launched itself into the frame, causing some bits of plaster to fly from the wall. With the second body slam, the door was projected inside the office, landing with a crash in the chaotic mess of magazines and scientific contraptions.

Three robots moved in through the door. They were so close that Odd could count their bolts. The boy ordered Richard to open fire and sprung at his enemies.

The air filled with a dense smoke that made Odd cough as he gripped the dossier and lowered his head. But he ended up running into something, making a low *dong* noise.

One of the robots seized him by the neck, grabbed the file from his hands and threw Odd into the hallway wall.

The boy fell to the floor, winded. He saw Richard exit the office on all fours between the legs of a robot that was twice as tall as him.

“Let’s get out of here, come on!” he said while helping the boy up.

“But...but...the dossier...”

Odd couldn’t tear his gaze away from the battered office door. The three giants destroyed everything in the room, the red lights on their helmets visible through the dark smoke.

At that moment, Richard’s phone began to ring. The boy picked up and silently listened for a few seconds.

“Change of plans,” he said to Odd after hanging up. “Show me how to get to the basement.”

Yumi reached her parents, breathless from her turbulent run.

“Come this way,” she said quietly. “They’re gathering at the foot of the staircase and will be here soon. What weapons do we have?”

Walter Stern gestured to several objects they had arranged on the floor: baseball bats, tennis racquets and red and blue tubes full of chemical mixtures prepared by Hertz. They also had another compound bow like Jim Morales's and some three-kilogram medicine balls resting against the wall.

Yumi sighed, took the bow and tried to pull the string. It was very hard.

"Wait," Jim said, approaching her. "If we alter it here and here, we can reduce the strength and make it easier to use."

The girl thanked him and turned to her parents.

"Gather the other students at the end of the hallway. Jim, Walter and I will stay here and try to defend everyone."

"We can help you!" her mother protested.

Yumi shook her head.

"You need to comfort the students, they're very scared. Walter, please go to Ulrich's room. You should find the weapons he uses for training under his bed: bamboo swords for kendo, nunchakus and other such things. Jim, come with me to Jeremy's room. If I remember correctly, he should have a good selection of electric cables and other things in his closet that should be useful."

Yumi surprised herself: she had taken control naturally and she was now giving orders to teachers and the other adults. But this was just as well, because she knew X.A.N.A. and how to fight him.

The aluminium bow in her hands, she began to run towards her friend Jeremy's room.

Richard observed Odd and raised an eyebrow.

“And you’re planning on getting through the wall of robots with...that?”

“With that...and my innate agility,” Odd said with a sarcastic smile.

The boy finished filling the plastic bucket with detergent, and then used the dishcloth to stir the mixture of water and soap.

He and Richard had crossed the ground floor of the building without any problems, and then almost made it down into the basement, but there was a small group of robots blocking the passage, causing them to hide in the first room they had come across: the broom cupboard.

Odd took the soapy water, turned the door handle and stuck his head out.

At the end of the long hallway was the metallic door that led to the Kadic basement. And that’s precisely where the three enormous robots were positioned. They weren’t doing anything in particular. They were all simply standing motionless in front of the door. The cables on the head of one of them were so long that they snaked along the floor and...yes, it plugged into one of the nearby power sockets. That must give it quite a recharge!

Richard, who was behind him, had taken two brooms and was brandishing them like dual lances. Odd smiled at him and nodded.

He exited his cupboard refuge. The robots' metallic helmets immediately turned in his direction. The one that was connected to the power socket unplugged its cable from the wall and its hair became disorderly yet again.

Odd held his breath before releasing everything he had, screaming *BANZAAAAA!!!!!!* at the top of his lungs.

He ran along the corridor like a man possessed, bucket full of soapy water in one hand and dishcloth in the other, Richard hot on his heels.

The robots began to walk slowly towards him, their knight-like armour gleaming.

Odd ducked, bent his knees, set the bucket down on the black and white flagstone floor and then turned it upside-down, emptying all the water onto the floor.

“Now, Richard!” he shouted. “Skaaaaaaaate...”

He let go of the bucket and grabbed the dishcloth with both hands, holding it right in front of him. As soon as he made it to the large puddle of water on the flagstones, he let go of it, sliding feet-first towards the door, like a soccer player trying to steal the ball from the opposing team.

The robots now also found themselves in the soap-filled water, and Odd heard their iron feet as they slipped and lost their balance... He gritted his teeth and whacked the heel of the one closest to him.

The robot collapsed onto the floor with a metallic crash while Odd slid up to the door. He opened it wide, hearing the other robots fall to the floor and seeing Richard quickly ap-

proaching. He only had one broomstick now, and it was broken in two.

The young man hurried to the other side of the door and, due to his momentum, slid down the stairs to the basement on his buttocks. Odd quickly closed the door and followed him.

He and Richard quickly crossed the straight basement hallway between dripping pipes and boilers as big as closets. Odd located the fuse boxes. Behind a transparent plastic door that was covered in dust, a series of dark levers could be seen.

“Hurry,” Richard huffed. “They’ll be on us in no time.”

The boy nodded silently, opened one of the small doors and began to pull the levers down one by one.

The battle took place on a staircase between the first and second floors of the dormitory. And they were losing.

Yumi’s arrow flew from her bow with a sharp whistle. It hit one of the robots right in the joint between its neck and its armour, and remained there. The robot staggered, took another step towards the young girl, tripped on an electric cable stretched from one side of the staircase to the other, and fell face-first onto the floor.

“Nice shot,” exclaimed Jim, who had given up his bow in favour of the medicine balls. “You’ve got some natural talent.”

“Unfortunately it won’t be enough,” Yumi responded with a half-smile. “There are too many of them.”

And it was true. Although, as the girl had predicted, each shot they landed on the giants made them more and more transparent, the army of enemies was too large.

Evidently, they consumed energy in maintaining their solid forms during battle, but each time a robot was about to become invisible, it retreated to the back of the group to plug itself into an electric socket, and another would immediately take its place.

The robots had slowly begun to gain ground. They climbed the stairs while avoiding the cables stretched across some steps, just like the rest of the traps they had prepared. Each time they drew closer to the desks Jim and Walter had positioned at the top of the stairs as a last line of defence.

Yumi loosed another arrow, then reached into her quiver. Her fingers grabbed at nothing, until they finally found a thin aluminium rod. The girl stopped to glance over her shoulder. It was the last one. She had run out of arrows.

“How are our munitions holding up?” she asked.

“We’re almost fresh out, I’m afraid,” Walter panted in her ear.

Yumi shot her final arrow. She then dropped the bow and turned, searching for a new weapon. She found a pair of Ulrich’s nunchakus abandoned on the floor. They were two shiny metal sticks joined at one end by a small chain. They could be of use.

She gripped one of the sticks and spun the other one around with a rapid wrist movement to give it speed. She then jumped over the protective desk and began her attack at the bottom of the stairs.

The girl struck one of the robots with her weapon above its stomach, managing to cause it to reel back, then ducked down, striking another robot on the backs of its knees.

An enormous hand seized her by her sweatshirt and threw her back. Yumi lost all the air from her lungs while the pain shot through her back.

She tried to get up. She heard Jim shout, before a deafening detonation filled the air, hurting her ears.

It was a gunshot. Walter had taken out his gun.

Yumi increased her grip on her nunchaku to whack the hand of the robot before it could grab her again, then heard another detonation and flattened herself against the wall so Walter could more easily miss her. However, a fist struck her side and the nunchaku slipped from between her fingers, falling to the floor with a dull noise. She was disarmed.

The girl prepared to fight with her bare hands.

And that's when the lights went out.

The basement was plunged into complete darkness. Odd and Richard applied themselves to the task, first disconnecting the main current and then blocking the switches to the emergency generator...and everything else they had un-earthed there. They couldn't see any further than the tips of

their noses, but no robot had come down to capture them, which was undoubtedly a good sign.

“Do you have a lighter?” Odd asked.

“No, but I have my phone...” after a few moments of silence, Richard sighed. “It’s no use, I can’t find it. It must have fallen out of my pocket during the fight against those monsters...”

“Don’t worry, I’ve still got mine,” said Odd.

They heard a click, and he could then finally see Richard’s pale face, illuminated by the white splendour of his phone’s screen.

“You ok?” the boy asked him.

“It’s nothing, but thanks. Looks like we won.”

“Yeah.”

Guided by the weak light of his telephone, they retraced their steps and made it back to the corridor that had not long since been infested by robots. Silence reigned, and the place seemed completely deserted.

“They left,” Richard commented, incredulous.

Odd looked for Professor Hertz’s number in his contact list. He quickly spoke with her. A hard battle had taken place in the science laboratories. Principal Delmas had suffered a head injury and needed an ice pack, but nobody had been seriously hurt. The robots were retreating.

Yumi had been right: without electricity, the cowards were forced to flee!

Too exhausted to jump for joy, Odd and Richard left the building.

It was a humid and cold night, and the air was thick with fog. It was the first time he had seen the school in such a way, with no lights, not even in the main buildings.

They walked slowly along the path between the trees that led to the dormitory and came in through the main door, which the robots had broken down, leaving it lying warped on the floor like a pile of iron and bits of shiny crystal.

*I hope everyone's ok,* thought Odd.

He and Richard climbed the stairs and reached the first floor. There were signs of battle everywhere, power sockets torn from the walls, traces of chemical substances all over the place and broken-down doors, creating a desolated image. In one corner was a trampled pink shirt, abandoned alongside a pair of mismatched socks. But there were no more robots there, and that was the most important thing in the end.

The two boys then began to hear voices: murmurs, crying, off whispers.

“Hey!” Odd called.

He sped up his pace. He and Richard hurried up the stairs leading to the second floor. They had to dodge around a barricade of tables, two of which had been broken in half. They then saw lights: lighters, matches, mobile phone screens...

“Heeeey!” he shouted again. “Is everyone ok?”

A shadow dashed towards him. It was Yumi, looking unkempt and with a serious scratch on her face, slowly covering her cheek in blood.

“You did it, Odd!” the girl said.

She leapt onto him and took him in her arms.

# EPILOGUE

The crystal cradle dominated the centre of the plaza, close to the fountain. Inside, Eva Skinner seemed like some sort of post-punk Sleeping Beauty.

Her hair and make-up had been done with such precision: her blonde hair framed her face, fuchsia surrounded her eyes, and crimson red covered her lips. She was wearing leather bracelets on her wrists and a jacket, both covered with roses whose stems formed electric guitars, the Ceb Digitals logo.

Jeremy removed his gaze from the gleaming crystal and turned towards Ulrich.

“What do you think we should do now?”

“I don’t know... Try to wake her up?”

Jeremy sighed. His friend was totally right. They certainly couldn’t leave her here. But a part of him wondered what good it would do at the end of the day. For the moment, Eva

was safe, peacefully asleep. Once she was awake, what would they do? They couldn't return to the real world, unless Hannibal Mago wanted them to, but the boss of the terrorists surely had other things on his mind for the time being, between the army of robots, X.A.N.A. and everything else.

The boy pressed his hands against the crystal bubble and tried to push it with all his might, but it wouldn't budge. The cradle didn't have a single edge and met in perfect unity with its base, which supported it like the trunk of a tree.

Ulrich tried to help him, and they gasped for breath as they worked together for several minutes.

"We won't get anywhere this way."

Jeremy got to his knees, feeling more constrained in his elf tights, and began to study the cradle from all angles. The transparent crystal became more and more opaque as he approached the base, becoming a bluer shade. On one side, the blue crystals were so small that they were nearly invisible at first, and they were in the shape of the eye of X.A.N.A.

"You told me that X.A.N.A. made this thing, right?" asked Jeremy, pointing out the symbol.

"It seems that way," mumbled Ulrich. "To be honest, I was a bit confused at the time, so I didn't..."

"We'll go with this."

Jeremy brushed his fingers against the eye of X.A.N.A., then pressed on it forcefully, as if he were pushing a button. He raised his head. The crystal that was protecting Eva Skin-

ner disappeared, falling on the young, sleeping girl and gliding over her skin like silver rain.

“So what are you going to do now, genius?” commented Ulrich, letting out a laugh. “Are you going to see if giving her a kiss works?”

“Th-there’s no point...” responded Jeremy, glowing red. “She’s already waking up.”

The young girl’s partly-open mouth trembled, then opened with a yawn. One of her hands closed in a fist, and Eva started to rub her eyes. Another yawn.

Jeremy and Ulrich stayed and watched her, amazed as the young girl began to move. A bit later, she opened her eyes and propped herself up on her elbow. Her face, made up like a rock star, had a perplexed and amusing expression.

“Who...who are you?” she asked in English.

“Huuuuuh?” Ulrich asked her at the same time.

“She speaks English, right?” Jeremy commented with a smile. “Remember, when she came to France, she was possessed by X.A.N.A., so she shouldn’t remember anything... Not even our language.

“Um, uh, hello!” the boy began, trying to recall his best English. “My name is...Jeremy. And this is my friend, Ulrich.”

Eva placed a hand to her head, confused.

“Where am I? I was attending a Ceb Digital concert, but... I don’t remember anything else. I must have been dreaming...”

Jeremy turned towards Ulrich.

“She says that she remembers going to a concert,” he translated, “then nothing. She believes that she must have dreamt everything.”

“Ah, perfect,” commented Ulrich. “It’s better that way, I think. Except...now what?”

“Now we tell her the truth,” he answered next. “We need to start somewhere.”

Jeremy sat cross-legged on the pavement of the plaza. He thought about this poor girl, suddenly waking up in an unknown world, in front of an elf and a samurai. She must be scared!

He tried to calm her down with a gentle smile, then in English again, he started to tell her everything...

Aelita huddled under the sheets of her father’s enormous bed in the Hermitage.

She was all alone. X.A.N.A. had disappeared several hours earlier, and she had wandered all throughout the Mirror, searching through and completely reliving all the chapters of the journal. She had eventually lost hope, pressed the *FREE EXPLORATION* button on the box and returned home to the Hermitage to rest.

But now, she wasn’t able to get to sleep. Everything was boiling up inside her like the water in a pressure cooker. Professor Hopper was a scientist, and he did nothing without a reason. So why had he orchestrated this whole labyrinth, track after track, that brought her nowhere? He wanted to

help her understand it all, so that she would do something...? But what? She hadn't the slightest clue.

Furthermore, there was an event that she still found unexplainable. Aelita saw herself speaking with her father, allowing him to help her. Then, later on, when she was on the couch with a high fever, not too long before the men in black attacked the house, he said that he had never used the memory-snatching machine the other way around.

This was what was making Aelita feel so terrible. It was because of the memory-snatching device that her father had invented. Had he used it on her to erase a memory that was too dangerous, or maybe the opposite, to introduce her to new memories?

"If that's what you did," murmured the girl. "Your plan didn't work, Daddy. I don't remember anything."

She sometimes got the impression that her brain was divided into two, and that one of the parts was as impregnable and inaccessible as a strongbox. Ever since Jeremy had woken her up from her slumber on Lyoko, Aelita had been the victim of constant amnesia attacks. Her memories slipped through her fingers like water.

The young girl continued to turn in bed. Her father's room was submerged in darkness, the windows opened to let in the stuffy summer night breeze.

Aelita was ten years away from her friends...and the real world.

What were Jeremy and the others doing right now?

It had already been several hours since they last communicated with her. Something must have happened to them, and she felt trapped inside a virtual prison.

But she had to have faith. One way or another, everything would end well.

The young girl curled up in a foetal position, her hands up against her face. Then, her fingers slid to the front of her neck, curling around the necklace she was wearing. She caressed the end of the golden necklace with her fingers, feeling the contour of the letters. *W* and *A*, *Waldo* and *Anthea*.

*Mummy*, she thought to herself. *You'll see, I'll manage to find you one way or another, and we'll be together again, and we'll become a family again.*

On this thought, she finally managed to find her way to sleep.

Yumi's face was illuminated by the small candle that Odd had lit on the ground of the room, midway between his bed and Ulrich's empty bed.

Outside, the night was dark and silent. It was at least four in the morning. Inside the room, the small flame seemed to decrease the already very small amount of space that separated the two children, raising a small barrier between them and the rest of the world.

They were covered by a pair of large sheets, their heads filled with thoughts and their eyes besieged by wrinkles from lack of sleep. When cutting the electricity, Odd had also cut

off the circuit controlling the thermostat for the boiler room, and now it was terribly cold all throughout Kadic. Instead of returning to their rooms, almost all of the students had chosen to sleep together in the science lab, between mountains of clothes and warm blankets gathered up from here and there.

Professor Hertz and the rest of the adults again took guard duty shifts, in case the Green Phoenix decided to attack again.

And then there were the two of them, Yumi and Odd, alone in the deserted dorms, thinking to themselves.

“Do you think the others are doing alright?” wondered Yumi.

She said “the others”, but in reality, she wanted to say “Ulrich”. As far as Odd could recall, these two had never been apart for so long. The boy tried to smile.

“Of course! I’m sure they’re doing great!” he then exclaimed. “I’m sure they’re having less problems than we are with all these crazy robots and whatnot.”

“Yes, but...” she contradicted him, “X.A.N.A. and the Green Phoenix are holding them prisoner in the virtual worlds...”

Odd stretched a hand out from under the covers and tightly grasped the young girl’s hand in his.

“We’re going to get them out of there, Yumi,” he encouraged her. “I give you my word.”

“Uh-huh...” commented Yumi, raising an eyebrow sarcastically. “And how are we going to do that, exactly?”

Odd threw his arms out wide, causing the covers to fall to the floor.

“You can be sure we’ll find a way! And I’d bet anything that Jeremy’s already got a plan all laid out and a way to get us his instructions. You know how he is: he’s stubborn and he’s always got a plan when we need one. Not to mention even when we don’t need one...”

“Well,” said Yumi with a weak smile, “we haven’t had too much trouble handling things either up ‘til now...”

“That’s right! Let’s just get it out there, we were geniuses! The idea to cut the electricity was, quite frankly, brilliant. We had them running off with their tails between their legs!”

Silence fell between the two children again. They had a bunch of problems to face: Jeremy’s kidnapping, Ulrich and Eva stuck in the First City, Aelita trapped in the Mirror...and the Green Phoenix...and the men in black...and, above all else, X.A.N.A.

How would they manage to stop them? They were only kids.

But, for whatever reason, Odd still felt full of confidence.

He rose with a feline jump and snatched up the candle, approaching the closed window. The glass was frozen, and the tips of the trees swayed outside with the turbulent motion of the wind. He didn’t feel any envy at all for the adults that were out there on guard duty.

“You know what, my friend?” he began to speak again, placing his hands on his hips. “We were sensational. Ok, maybe we didn’t win the war, but the battle tonight was a triumph. The ‘GRAND BATTLE OF KADIC’ will forever remain a part of the history of this school. They will sing its name and remember it forever and ever...”

Mmhm. As always, he was exaggerating. He thought that maybe it’d be better if he left off there. The boy turned to Yumi and returned to her side, squatting to look her in the eyes.

“We still have a lot of mysteries to solve, but I’m sure that we’ll soon find a way to reunite the group. We’ll get the bad guys, and we’ll make everything go back to normal. We’re the Lyoko Warriors, after all. Our mission has always been to save the world, right?”

“Thanks, Odd,” Yumi said to him with a warm smile.

“Hey, no need for that,” avoided Odd, embarrassed. “I’m the group idiot, remember? Don’t be so serious, it’s confusing for me!”

“Ok, ok,” said Yumi with a small laugh. “But thanks all the same.”

Odd leaned towards the young girl, the flame of the candle only a few centimetres from his face.

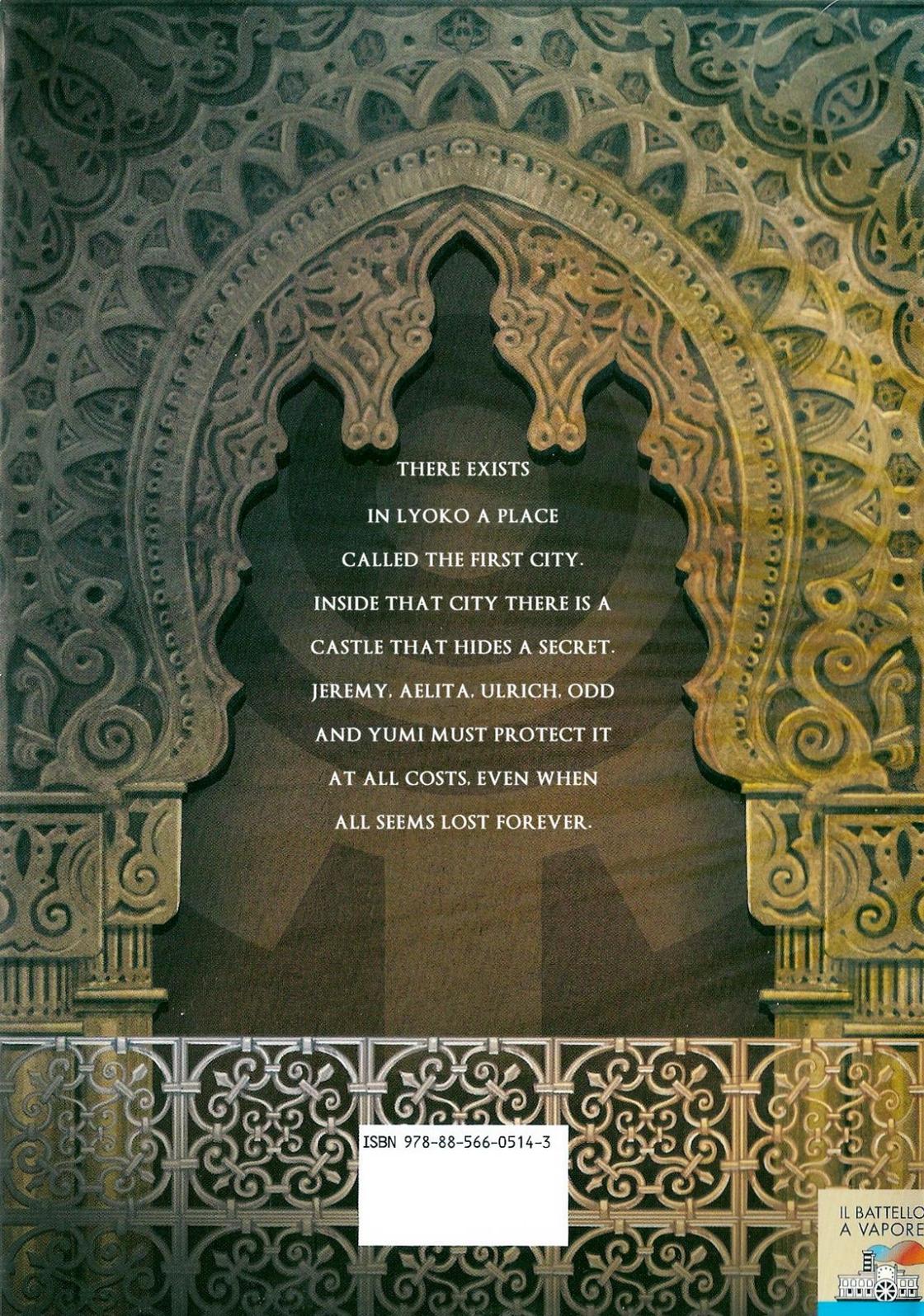
“Let’s go to the laboratory with the others.” he whispered. “It’s too cold to sleep here.”

And he blew out the candle with a single breath.

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THERE EXISTS  
IN LYOKO A PLACE  
CALLED THE FIRST CITY.  
INSIDE THAT CITY THERE IS A  
CASTLE THAT HIDES A SECRET.  
JEREMY, AELITA, ULRICH, ODD  
AND YUMI MUST PROTECT IT  
AT ALL COSTS, EVEN WHEN  
ALL SEEMS LOST FOREVER.

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IL BATTELO  
A VAPORE

