

JEREMY BELPOIS

CODE LYOKO

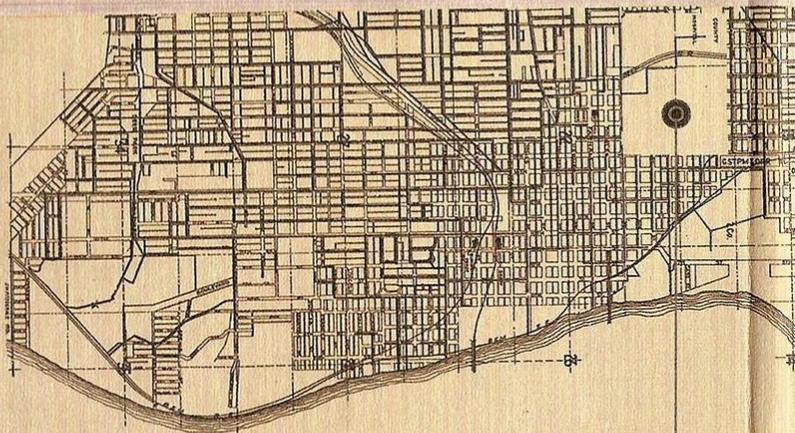
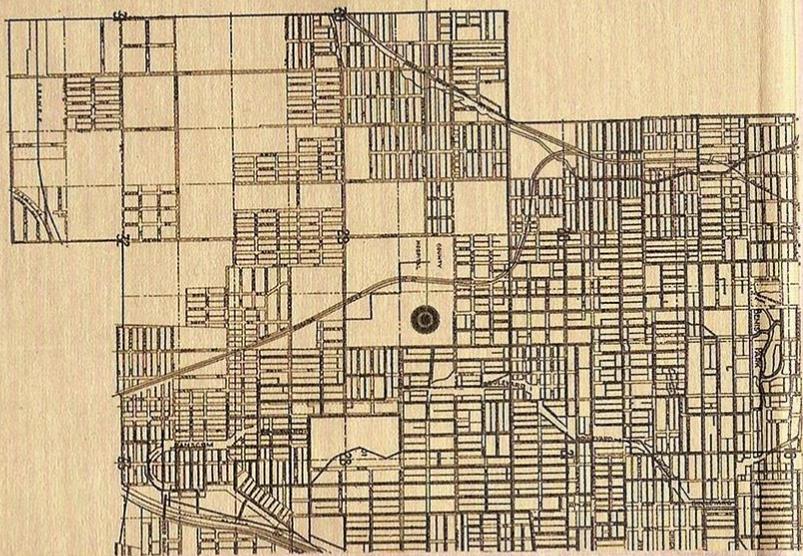


THE ARMY OF NOTHING

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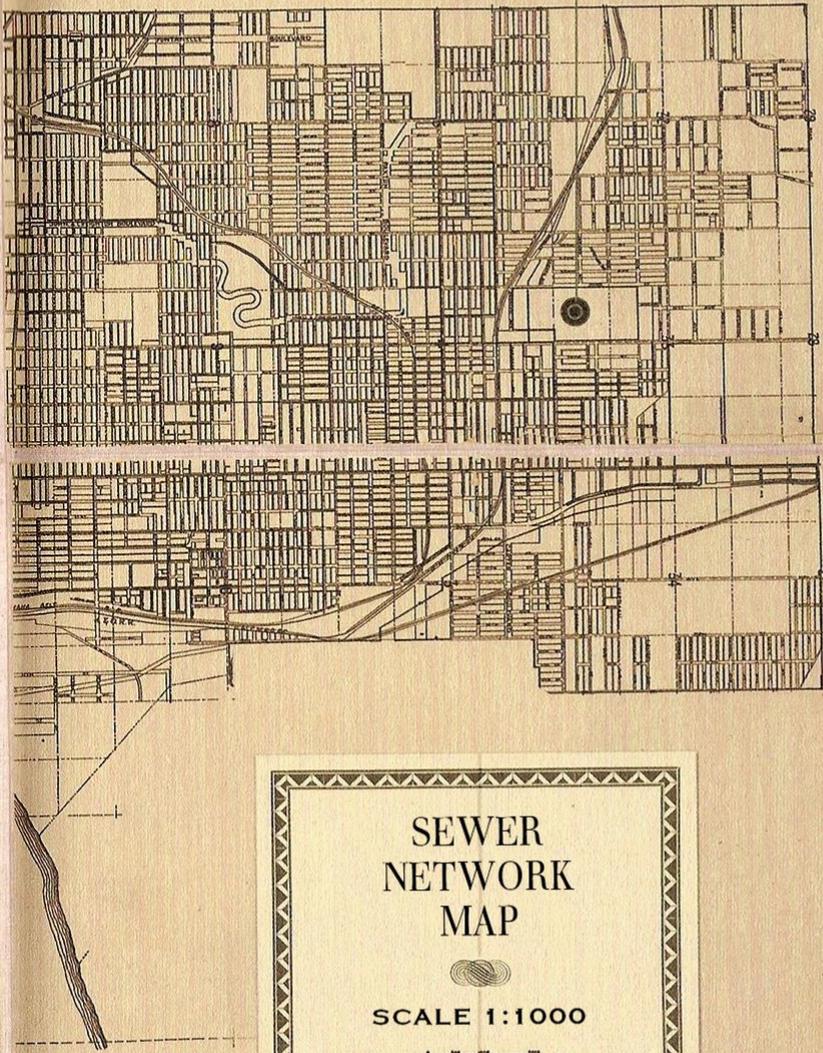


KADIC
ACADEMY



HERMITAGE
VILLA

GREEN
PHOENIX



SEWER
NETWORK
MAP



SCALE 1:1000





CODE LYOKO

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Jeremy Belpois

The Army of Nothing

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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 history is for all of my friends,
But it is above all else for you, Aelita.
Goodness knows if you're still listening. . .
Jeremy*

PROLOGUE

NOCTURNAL MEETING

Grigory Nictapolus was visibly nervous. It was an unusual sensation for him, and that made him even more nervous.

It was night time and the man was silently waiting on the border between Kadic Academy and the garden of the house that had once belonged to Professor Hopper, the Hermitage. Behind him was a barrier of planks separating the park from the garden. In front of Grigory, a veritable jungle of trees so tall that they seemed to claw at the sky with their branches, hiding the school buildings from his sight.

The man sighed. Beneath his right armpit he could clearly feel the weight of his gun, a large Desert Eagle so powerful it could take down a rhinoceros with a single bullet. He carried his hunting knife and four hand grenades attached to his belt, while the cartridge belt of a machine gun sat diagonally

across his chest. He was armed enough to take on an army. But this night, he wasn't awaiting any ordinary army.

Grigory listened intently. From the school hidden behind the curtain of vegetation came the sounds of battle, shouting, and the explosions of many windows being shattered to smithereens. He increased his grip on the leash he held in his left hand, and observed the two dogs lying by his feet: Hannibal and Scipio, his enormous Rottweilers; muscular, heavy beasts with bad tempers who he had personally raised to become wild combat animals. But they were now both lying on the ground, close together and with their muzzles resting between their front legs. They were very scared.

All of a sudden, the dogs leapt up, turned their mouths towards the scrub and began to make a hoarse growl in unison.

Grigory drew the leash back to keep them at bay. After several moments, he started to hear something. It was a deep sound, like metal moving through mud, heavy steps made by something inhuman that was advancing towards them from between the trees. The man placed a hand on the butt of his gun: better to be safe than sorry.

Finally, the first soldier arrived from beneath the trees. It was easily two metres tall, and as solid and imposing as an armoire that had been lifting weights at the gym. It wore shiny bronze armour, and its face was a blank, dark metal mask with a series of yellow lights that glowed and dimmed

at regular intervals. From its head came a waterfall of black cables that ended in electrical plugs.

Hannibal and Scipio both let out a few barks and jumped behind Grigory with a single bound, pressing themselves against his legs. Grigory didn't want to show his fear in front of the scary being, and so he cleared his throat before speaking to it in the driest way he could manage.

“Did you bring what we asked for?” was all he could say.

The soldier gave no sign of having heard him and simply passed by him, moving through the barrier towards the Hermitage. The man realised that the creature's steps seemed less sure and shakier, and its armour was even less shiny than usual. It seemed to be becoming translucent, like a ghost.

More soldiers exited the trees. They marched in double file and only the row of small, yellow lights across their helmets animated their inexpressive faces. Some of them were as solid and compact as mountains, while others seemed intangible. Grigory noticed that their breastplates were covered in strange chemical substances, and their imposing armour had some holes here and there. The battle must have been harder than initially expected.

One of the soldiers approached Grigory and held out its hand, offering him a palm-computer not much larger than a regular mobile phone. Its screen was lit up.

“Thank you,” said Grigory, taking the device.

Without response, the soldier reunited with its peers and continued its march towards the Hermitage's basement. There, the scanner column would swallow them up, making them disappear forever.

Grigory now felt calmer: once their mission was complete, the soldiers created by X.A.N.A. would autodestruct, just like they had planned. He tugged on Hannibal and Scipio's leashes to convince them to get up, and walked through the barrier with them, entering the Hermitage's back yard.

The house was a narrow, three-storey construction, with a gable roof. On its left, a garage with a flat roof sat against one of the side walls. The sliding door was open and the creatures marched in this direction to access the basement.

Grigory turned to two human soldiers, who had frozen at the abnormal sight of the robot parade and let out a crazed, hoarse laugh.

"Don't worry, children," he said in a mocking tone. "Those boogeymen won't hurt you. Haven't you seen their armour? They're becoming transparent."

One of the soldiers tried to babble something in response but Grigory shrugged.

"Once they've come through," he ordered them, "immediately close the barrier. And don't forget to warn me if anything weird happens."

This said, the man and his two dogs walked around the side of the house.

The pickup was parked on the road, outside the front door. It was red and seemed rather beaten-up, but beneath the rickety façade hid a veritable race-car. Grigory had tuned the motor himself.

The man climbed in and sat Hannibal and Scipio on the ample back seat. He then sat in the driver's seat, breathing heavily as he took the palm-computer the soldier had delivered to him. He observed the incalculable mess of numbers and other characters that shone against the black screen.

Grigory didn't understand one iota of it all, but he did recognise one word that flashed in the upper-left part of the mishmash: *AELITA*, the name of Hopper's daughter.

It remained to be seen why Hannibal Mago was so interested in this thing. Grigory hadn't the slightest idea, but during the many years he'd spent working for the man, he had learnt one thing: it's better to ask few questions, keep your eyes open and always have a way out.

He took out a flash drive from the glove box and connected it to the palm-computer, registering a copy of the device contents. It was a mere precaution. Maybe, on the day when he least expects it, Mago will turn his back on him and this data...whatever it may be...will be more useful to him.

Grigory turned and distractedly stroked his two dogs.

"Come on, my pretties," he whispered to them. "Best not to keep Mago waiting."

1

THE MORNING AFTER THE BATTLE



Eva Skinner felt very lucky.

Firstly, she looked truly sensational: the fuchsia make-up on her eyelids went perfectly with her blue eyes, and the shine on her lips made her small mouth look like a heart. She wore a splendid fluorescent green jacket and boots that couldn't be any more fashionable.

Oh, if only her friends could see her now!

In front of her was a small, crystal lake surrounded by a small wood of glass trees.

One of the trees stretched and bent like a willow, and from its branches ran drops of water in all the colours of the

rainbow, raining on the surface of the lake like an aethereal waterfall.

Eva was in a park, the park of a marvellous and deserted city, of which she was the one and only queen. What more could she ask for?

Well, of course, not everything was perfect... Starting with the strange boys she had met here. The first, who says his name is Ulrich, was a cute and athletic boy. But he was dressed in a very tragic way, like a samurai, with his traditional sword attached to his belt. The other was even worse: he was called Jeremy, and he wore a pair of very large and round glasses, had very pointy ears, wore horrible green tights and seemed like the ugly cousin of an elf.

Eva couldn't remember how on Earth she had agreed to go walking with guys like that. She was a girl of a certain social standing, and, without a doubt, the prettiest girl at her school. She turned around. Jeremy and Ulrich were seated cross-legged on the bank of the small lake and were talking to one another animatedly. They spoke in French.

Although she considered speaking French a very chic thing to do, Eva had never found the time to study it. However, to her enormous surprise, she could now understand everything. It was as if a part of her brain was automatically translating their words into English, and in truth, that is very strange.

Eva shrugged before approaching the two boys. There was nobody in this city apart from the three of them, so she would be better off getting along with them.

Jeremy, Ulrich and Eva were in the park of the First City, and it had been several hours since they had heard news from the outside world.

Jeremy had tried to explain to Eva why she was here, including the story about X.A.N.A. and everything else, but the girl seemed more interested in her clothes than his words and so he had given up after a short while. He had more urgent matters to think about: they had to find a way to get out of the First City and rematerialise in the real world.

“What do you think’s going on out there?” Ulrich asked him, a worried expression on his face. Yumi was still in reality, where X.A.N.A. had sent an army of monstrous creatures.

“I’m sure that Yumi and Odd are managing on their own,” Jeremy said, trying to smile. “Richard and Professor Hertz are with them, not to mention the principal and our parents. And I believe Aelita is safe and sound in the Mirror: her father’s journal is a tranquil place with no dangers.”

“You’re forgetting about X.A.N.A.,” Ulrich pointed out. “X.A.N.A. is with her.”

Jeremy felt a shiver rise up his spine. That was the thought he had been trying his best to avoid.

“X.A.N.A. is here too, with us,” he responded. “He has already retaken his place as the absolute master of Lyoko and the First City. And, even so, he hasn’t attacked us yet.”

“So?” exclaimed Ulrich. “We stay here and wait? But sooner or later, he might set his monsters loose to tear us to pieces, and then...”

Jeremy clicked his fingers, his face brightening with joy.

“You’re right!” he exclaimed.

“Right? About what?” asked Ulrich, staring at him in confusion.

“About X.A.N.A.’s monsters! If we provoke them and they attack us, we’ll lose our life points, and...”

“Huh? But... Have you gone crazy?”

“Don’t you remember our battles on Lyoko? Without life points, the game is over and we go back to reality. We’ll materialise in the factory scanners and we’ll be safe again.”

“The factory is infested with the Green Phoenix terrorists,” Ulrich responded, unconvinced. “How on Earth are we going to get out of *there*?”

“I don’t know,” admitted Jeremy. “But there’s always a way to get out of something like this, right?”

He realised that Eva had stopped looking in the mirror created by the pure water in the lake. The girl returned to them and smiled.

“Instead of staying here and arguing, why don’t you accompany me on a tour? I’d like to explore this fantastic place.”

Eva had just spoken in French, though with a very strong American accent.

Jeremy told himself that this girl may be brighter than she appeared.

Odd Della Robbia awoke feeling as cold as ice and with the sensation of having bruises on every square centimetre of his skin. At first he had thought that sleeping on the science laboratory floor would have been fun, but he hadn't taken the hard tile floor into account. What's more, it was incredibly cold. The previous night, Odd had been forced to cut the power to all the school buildings to stop their enemies from recharging their batteries. It had been a smart idea, because it had saved them all... But it had also disabled the thermostat and now the boiler was inactive.

Odd poked his head out of his sleeping bag. The morning light had begun to filter through the large laboratory windows. There was a jumble of desks, tables and microscopes lined up along the walls, while in the middle area, which had been completely cleared of furniture and apparatus, in the faint light Odd could see the silhouettes of Kadic's students, sleeping in their bags, over which they had thrown quilts and blankets they had found around the school. The principal was there too, as well as the teachers and a few parents: Ulrich and Jeremy's fathers, Yumi's parents and his own, Robert and Marguerite Della Robbia. All together like a family on

a camping trip. Except that they weren't out camping; they were at war.

Yumi, whose sleek black hair was spread all over the pillow, was still asleep beside him. She must have been exhausted: during the battle that night, she had fought like a true warrior.

The girl opened one eye at that moment and began to laugh.

“What is it?” Odd immediately asked her.

“Your...your hair...it looks ridiculous...”

Odd had long, blond hair, which he usually gelled up to have it stick up above his head, sort of like a burning flame. But he realised that at that moment, his glamorous hairstyle was a real disaster, all his hair flattened to one side. He must have looked absurd!

“Nobody panic. I'll fix everything in a fraction of a second,” he responded with a smile.

Without even looking for a mirror, he smoothed it back into place with a few precise movements.

“Everyone's still asleep...” he then said, looking around.

Yumi was now completely awake and climbed out of her sleeping bag. She was wearing a sweatshirt and black jeans. Black had always been her favourite colour.

“Richard's not here,” the girl observed.

Odd realised that she was right. Their friend's sleeping bag was empty. He glanced at his watch and saw that it was six in the morning. Where could he have gone so early?

He and Yumi looked at each other. They then left the laboratory without a sound.

Kadic Academy was littered with clear signs of battle. All parts of the school were covered in broken glass, electrical outlets torn from the walls, doors removed from their hinges and desks upturned.

Odd and Yumi, with Richard and Sissi – the principal’s daughter – had raised the alarm the night before. As soon as they’d seen the robots coming out from the trees, they had run to warn the others.

Professor Hertz had prepared smoke grenades and bombs containing corrosive acid and the children had fought the machines with anything they could get their hands on: baseball bats and football helmets, bows and arrows, and even a dishcloth and soapy water.

Many of the school’s students were still in a state of shock, and some of the teachers had to take sleeping pills to get to sleep. For Yumi and Odd, however, it was different. They had never seen robots like the ones from last night, but they had immediately noticed the symbol the monsters had engraved on their armour: it was the mark of X.A.N.A., the artificial intelligence that dominated Lyoko.

“It’s going to take us a century and a half to fix everything up,” commented Yumi as she looked bleakly around her.

“Don’t tell me you want to waste all your time cleaning the school!” Odd responded with a grimace. “We have a

much more important mission: defeat the Green Phoenix and free our friends! Especially Eva!”

Yumi couldn't help but smile. Odd was very infatuated with the North American student and he had been extremely upset to discover that X.A.N.A. was controlling her body, but obviously, he hadn't completely lost hope.

The two children left the building and began to look for Richard. They walked through the garden in the park, caressed by a splendid sunrise, and the trees still laden with dew. They quickly checked the student dormitory and cafeteria, but they found no trace of their friend and decided to try the administrative building. They passed by Professor Hertz's office, which X.A.N.A.'s robots had ravaged, and continued on to the basement.

“Do you think Richard is trying to repair the thermostat?” Odd asked Yumi.

The girl shrugged, doubtful.

“From what I know,” she finally responded, “he's studying engineering at university, but I don't get the impression that he's very good at practical stuff.”

Richard Dupuis was twenty-three years old, and as a child, he had attended Kadic Academy, just like them. He had been a student of Professor Hopper and classmates with his daughter, Aelita. Except that Aelita and her father had been forced to flee the men in black by virtualising themselves onto Lyoko, and she hadn't continued to grow up. While Richard... Richard had become an adult.

They found him just outside the boiler room, seeming very worried.

“Richard!” greeted Odd. “How are you, man?”

“I...” the young man began, shrugging. “I’m looking for my palm-computer. I can’t find it anywhere.”

“You lost your PDA?” Yumi questioned, frowning with worry.

“I had it in my pant pocket yesterday, like I always do. When Odd and I cut the power, we were in total darkness here, and so I tried to dig it out to give us some light and I realised that it wasn’t there.”

“Come on,” Odd tried to console him, patting his back. “It can’t be that important.”

“Don’t you get it, Odd?” Yumi retorted, fuming. “X.A.N.A. was really controlling Eva Skinner. That means that he would have seen Professor Hertz’s file with the codes in it! According to Jeremy, Richard’s palm-computer contains the second part of the Code Down. So if X.A.N.A. gets his hands on it...”

Richard and Odd looked at her, eyes wide. They hadn’t thought about that.

But Yumi had. Something or someone, maybe even Professor Hopper in person, had filled the man’s palm-computer with programming code. Jeremy was the group’s resident computer genius and he was adamant that it was important.

“Let’s get to work,” exclaimed the girl. “We need to find this thing!”

The calendar on the wall showed that the date was the 4th of June, 1994. Aelita was in her father's journal, the virtual world her friends had named the Mirror, and which contained the six final days in the life of Professor Hopper before he disappeared inside Lyoko.

At that moment, the girl was seated in the Hermitage living room. It was a very orderly room, with a sofa, a lovely rug and an elegant library. A mirror on a bookshelf reflected her image: an elf with pink hair.

Aelita fiddled with the golden necklace around her neck. She caressed the delicate engraving on the surface with her fingertips: a *W* and an *A*. Waldo and Anthea, her parents' names. Just below it, a sailor's knot, symbolising their eternal link.

Aelita knew that she was alone. She was a prisoner in the virtual world her father had created as a perfect copy of her past, and she hadn't the slightest idea what to do. Jeremy had almost brought her back to reality, but she had refused. She had chosen to remain here with X.A.N.A. to try to become his friend again. But she and X.A.N.A. had then had an argument, and he had left, leaving her here alone.

To pass the time, the girl had used the navigation box to go back in time in her father's journal. The Mirror recounted a fascinating story: after having fled the military base of Project Carthage and after her mother was kidnapped, her father had sought refuge in Paris under a different name, in order to

escape the men in black and continue his experiments in secret.

And he had succeeded with the help of a scientist, Major Steinback, who had later become Professor Hertz.

They had both placed their trust in Walter when he had provided funding and constructed the supercomputer in an abandoned factory not far from the Hermitage or Kadic Academy. But Walter, the father of her friend Ulrich, had betrayed them. He sold her father out to the men in black.

Aelita had witnessed the final scene of the journal at least a dozen times. In 1994, to help her father, she had accepted to be the subject of a strange experiment that she remembered absolutely nothing about. Then, the men in black had found them and everything had shattered in the blink of an eye: the secret agents had opened fire, injuring Aelita, and in order to save her, her father had fled to Lyoko with her in his arms.

For the young girl, seeing these scenes again had been a startling surprise. Aelita had lost all her memories to do with these events. Her brain had erased them as if they had never existed. Why? Could this possibly be linked to what her father did to her in 1994?

Aelita had no clue. Letting out a long sigh, she went into the kitchen to drink some water.

Her hand went straight through the tap as if it were just an optical illusion. The girl smacked her forehead: how stu-

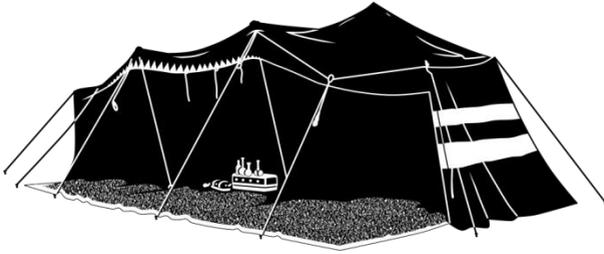
pid! She rummaged through her clothing and found the Mirror box.

It was blue in colour and had a small screen and three large, red buttons. With the two side ones she could advance and rewind through time in the journal, while the third, labelled *FREE EXPLORATION*, allowed her to move around the virtual world however she liked. But the command box also had another power: by holding it in her hand, she could touch the objects in the world, use them, and even eat and drink.

Like this, Aelita finally succeeded in quenching her thirst, then looked all around the deserted kitchen. She had to do something, find someone, or she would run the risk of going completely crazy. She was tired of being alone. And her friends needed her in the real world.

2

RICHARD'S PALM-COMPUTER



Aelita knew that she was really inside the same computer that housed her friends on Lyoko.

But the Mirror was located inside of a sandbox, a sort of virtual space completely isolated in the core of the super-computer that functioned separately from the rest of the content on the hard drive.

By building the Mirror, her father had had a stroke of genius. He created it by using the memory-snatching device on himself and Professor Hertz, and the events in their memories were perfectly recreated.

Aelita had combed the Parisian suburb from one side to the other. She could smell the summer air and hear the buzz-

ing of the mosquitoes, but had managed to find very few people. She could only find the people that her father and Professor Hertz had seen, some only for a few split seconds as they went about their days in 1994. Other than that, the city was empty and desolate. There were no children playing ball in the middle of the street, no workers behind the counters of stores...

What a sad place... thought the young girl to herself.

But she knew that she would find someone else at Kadic. In the world of the Mirror, it was currently more or less ten o'clock in the morning, and her father, who at this time had been working as a teacher, was surely in class.

Aelita crossed the Hermitage garden and strolled through the park towards Kadic. The class would be full of people, young boys and girls her age, her old classmates. She could sit on the floor and watch her father, listen to his lesson, have some company...

Upon arriving at the science laboratory, Aelita discovered that nothing had changed during all these years, except for the computer set up on the desk.

The one from 1994 was a large plastic, yellowed box with an enormous, cathode-ray tube monitor. Without really understanding why, Aelita recognised the computer model. It was a 486, which, at the time, was the best available. It used a Windows 3.11 operating system...from the prehistoric times of computer science.

She wondered what Jeremy would say if he saw it. The young girl then turned red thinking of her friend. She hoped with all her heart that he was doing well.

Her father was located behind the desk and was in the process of revealing his secrets on Basic, a programming language. His students were watching him as if he were a Martian.

Aelita discovered that her father taught passionately, enthusiastic about the new technologies that he was explaining. And yet, the Aelita from 1994 sat at her desk with an absent-minded and slightly bored look about her.

The young girl observed herself for a moment. The Aelita of ten years ago was nearly identical to her current self, but she also seemed quite different, more carefree. Beside her at the same desk sat Richard, who was also twelve years old, and they were joking quietly amongst each other, passing notes back and forth. She would have loved to approach the Aelita of 1994 and grab her by the shoulder, telling her to pay attention and listen to the lesson and take advantage of these final moments with her father, but unfortunately, there was nothing she could do. It was nothing more than a recording.

Once the class had finished, the students began to leave through the door. Each time that one of them left the room, they disappeared from view and the memories of her father, transforming into smoke and vanishing into thin air, no long-

er existing. Ultimately, the only ones remaining in the class were her father, Richard and the Aelita of 1994.

“Please, my dear,” said Hopper, “leave the classroom. I would like to speak for a moment with Richard.”

The child shrugged her shoulders and rose with a hop, becoming transparent, then invisible like the others before her.

Richard approached the professor, while Aelita did the same.

“Did I do something bad, Professor?” the boy asked.

Hopper burst out laughing.

“Besides not paying attention during my class? Don't worry, you're fine. But, well, I'd like to ask a favour of you.”

Aelita listened more closely. She had never yet explored this part of the journal. It could be important!

Her father passed through her without seeing or feeling her, and he lead the young Richard towards the computer at the desk.

In the middle of the river was an island that connected to the mainland by an iron bridge. The island had a factory on it, a large building made of red bricks and a steel roof with windows on all sides.

The factory and bridge had been there for years, rusting bit by bit without anyone paying them any attention, but for several days now, the place had been brought back to life, reanimated by the soldiers and workers and their constant

coming and going. There wasn't much to see on the outside besides the men who were keeping watch in front of the entrance. The inside, on the other hand, had changed a lot.

The suspended walkways that linked the entrance to the ground floor had fallen apart quite some time ago, but new mobile platforms had been installed in their place. Everything had been kept clean: the cement ground was free of debris, and the centre of the room contained a large, emerald green nomadic tent. Beside the enormous tent was the elevator that led to the three underground floors where Hopper had built the enormous structure of the supercomputer. The third floor, the deepest, housed this computer – a tall cylinder covered with golden glyphs that shone in the darkness. On the second level were the scanners that allowed access to the virtual world. And finally, on the first level was the command post from which the entire imposing, electronic apparatus could be managed.

At the moment, Memory was seated at the controls. The woman seemed to be between forty and fifty years of age, but the smooth skin of her face and the red cascade of hair that enveloped her made her appear younger. Over her plain jacket, she was wearing a white lab coat, and delicately around her neck sat a simple golden necklace.

Several screens full of symbols surrounded the scientist and in front of her, a sphere was levitating in the air, divided into four sectors. It was Lyoko, though obviously only its holographic projection.

Hannibal Mago approached Memory silently and placed a hand adorned with many rings on her shoulder.

“Well?” he asked.

Memory turned around on the pivoting chair at the terminal and looked into his predatory eyes without so much as blinking.

“I’m really sorry, Sir,” she replied. “Still nothing.”

The woman pointed to the palm-computer that was connected with a cable to the analysis systems at the console.

“I worked all night nonstop, but these codes...they’re unintelligible.”

Hannibal Mago clenched his teeth.

“Do you know what we’ve been doing up until now, dear? We conquered a fortress. We conducted a long siege, and we’ll need years to fully complete this step, but the factory is now ours, and we have reactivated the supercomputer. And we need to start on phase two now at this stage – consolidate the success. We must use Lyoko to attack the most important centres of power in the world. And we must do it quick, before our enemies manage to organise themselves.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Mago placed his hand on Memory’s shoulder again, but grasped it this time until a pained expression appeared on the woman’s face.

“I need to know what these codes do. Is it a weapon that could be used against us? Something from our enemies? Or something that could be exploited in our favour?”

“I...I don't know...Sir...”

Mago freed his prey, furious.

“Did you transmit the data to that creature...X.A.N.A.?” he asked in a weary tone.

“Of course. He's working on them now, but he hasn't responded yet.”

Hannibal Mago turned to leave.

“I'm giving you until one in the afternoon,” he said over his shoulder in an icy tone.

In the Mirror, Professor Hopper and the very young Richard Dupuis were sitting in the lab facing the old teacher's computer, while Aelita was perched on the table and carefully listening to them.

“Do you know what electronic mail is?” asked the professor.

“It's like regular mail,” the boy answered him, while nodding his head. “Like, you have an address and others can send you letters, except they arrive on the computer instead of the mailman bringing them to you.”

“Exactly,” smiled Hopper. “Good, Richard. Well, I've created an electronic mail address for you.”

The boy's face lit up with a glorious smile.

“For me? An e-mail address?”

“Yes. And on top of that, it's a very special address. A secret. I will be the only one able to use it to send you messages. So now, listen carefully: if things go the way I think they

will, in the near future, electronic mail will develop a lot more, and you could even have dozens of different addresses... So what I'm asking you is that you'll always remember the one that I've given you and that you'll never stop checking it from time to time."

Hopper passed a small card to Richard, and Aelita leaned in to see it better. On it was written *helpaelita@hopper.com* and a long password.

The professor saw the look of worry on the child's face and hurried to give him an explanation.

"It's a very unique address. The server, in other words, the computer used to save or transmit messages, is mine. It's located in a safe place and will continue to function even some fifty years from now. See what the address says, '*help Aelita?*' You're my daughter's best friend, so if she's ever in danger in the future, maybe even a long time from now, I'll use this e-mail to explain how to help her. Do you promise me you'll use it?"

Aelita brought her hands to her mouth, stunned. The pieces of the puzzle began to assemble in her mind one after another at the speed of light.

Everything must have happened more or less the following way: Richard saved the card from her father and continued to visit the strange e-mail address. When older, he bought a palm-computer that he added all his e-mail inboxes to, this one included. It maybe became a sort of habit for him,

an automatic action to check his e-mail that he didn't give much thought to anymore.

And then, one fine day, Aelita discovered the secret room hidden in the Hermitage. There must have been a switch in the wall or something of the sort. Basically, her father's computer had sent out e-mails automatically that took control of Richard's palm-computer.

The young man hadn't immediately made the connection between this and the promise that he made to her father ten years before, or perhaps he thought that it wasn't important, but he was pressed either way to visit the Hermitage to help her. Richard was someone that they could really count on.

During this time, Aelita remained alone in the science lab. Her father and Richard had left. But that didn't matter now. She was still lost in her thoughts.

To be honest, her father had really thought of everything. He knew that things could end badly and that Aelita ran the risk of losing her memory, and he prepared a treasure hunt for her, a long series of clues that would lead her...lead her to what?

She needed to find out.

The young girl stood. She knew now what she had to do: find XANA and hope that he would accept to help her...

3

THE GOLD NECKLACE



They all met at around midday in the principal's office. Yumi, Odd and Richard were seated some distance away from the group of adults, composed of Principal Delmas, Professor Hertz, and the group's parents: Walter Stern, Michel Belpois, the Della Robbias and the Ishiyamas.

The adults had woken up later in the morning. Their faces were deeply marked by fatigue and preoccupation, and up until now, they hadn't done anything but argue. The Ishiyamas wanted to call the police. The principal wished to evacuate the students. They had to warn someone. They had to...

"That's enough!" Odd finally yelled.

Everyone turned to look at him. His parents gave him a more serious look, as if to tell him to leave the talking to the

grown-ups. But Odd was definitely not the kind of person who'd let himself be scared by such a thing.

"You just don't get it," he exclaimed. "What do you think calling the police will do against an army of robots that came out of a computer? Well, I'll tell you what they can do: absolutely nothing! They'll think we've gone crazy! What's more, we're not just talking about some petty criminals, but the Green Phoenix, a terrorist organisation with soldiers armed to the teeth and that has now gotten its hands on the most important supercomputer in history! And they can use it to do...unthinkable things! Do you really think that the police would be able to help us?"

Principal Delmas tried to add his own two cents, but Hertz stopped him with a wave of her hand.

"The boy is right. Let him speak."

Encouraged by this small bit of success, Odd felt more sure of himself.

"We're the only ones who really know the enemy and how to confront it. We showed this much last night. If we remain united, we can defend Kadic and even defeat the Green Phoenix and save our friends."

Michel Belpois timidly raised a hand.

"But we're going to need help..."

It was Yumi who answered him.

"I agree with you on that one. We need to call Dido again, the boss of the men in black. They know the Green Phoenix and could help us take them down. But I'm also convinced

that we can't take on the monsters of Lyoko in our own reality. We need to fight X.A.N.A. and the terrorists using the supercomputer's power. But above all, we'll need a scanner to get Aelita, Eva and Ulrich out of there."

Silence fell on the room. Odd saw the adults look at one another out of the corners of their eyes, somewhat perplexed. But ultimately, they knew that the children were right.

"What do we do, then?" Delmas finally asked.

Odd and Yumi smiled.

"We need to reinforce guard duty, prepare more corrosive bombs and check our reserves to see how much time we could resist this siege," the boy listed off. "And naturally, call Dido and ask her to come right away to give us a hand."

"And we need to organise a vanguard to get into the Hermitage and take back control of it," Yumi then said in conclusion. "There will be soldiers on watch, so we're going to need to keep our eyes wide open...and find out how to take them by surprise."

Aelita didn't know where to find X.A.N.A. The creature, or rather the part of it that was still trapped in the Mirror, had left her there alone. It might even have already found a way to escape this virtual prison. Aelita had searched again and again, scouring the journal from one end to the other, but it was a hopeless mission; there were too many days and different locations, an entire city and an infinite number of hiding places.

The day before, X.A.N.A. had asked Aelita to help him, because he wanted to become a human being. She had replied that she didn't know how to do it, and he had become enraged. And the girl had to convince him to come back.

She then had an idea: X.A.N.A. wasn't human. He could take the form of a young boy, but really he was succeeding in integrating with the programming of the virtual world. He may have powers here, the ability to do things the young girl couldn't even imagine. He could be able to hear her.

The girl ran out of the school, towards the park, and cupped her hands around her mouth like a megaphone.

"X.A.N.A.!" she yelled at the top of her lungs, "X.A.N.A., COME HERE, PLEASE! I NEED TO TALK TO YOU! I NEED YOUR HELP!"

The 2nd of June 1994 was a splendid day. A light breeze drifted between the leaves, bringing with it the lingering soft scent of spring. Aelita could feel the grass give way beneath the soles of her shoes, and the summer air ruffled her hair.

The wind suddenly intensified, transforming into a whirlwind of dust and smoke before her eyes, and began to take form. Where there had previously been nothing but air now stood a boy. His hair was black, he was thin and muscular and his lips were drawn in a pout of discontent.

"Now you ask for my help?" he said. "After refusing me yours when I needed it?"

Aelita winced.

In a sense, she and X.A.N.A. had grown up together. They had played together in the First City; they had been friends. She didn't remember anything about this time in her life, which had evaporated from her mind like a puff of smoke, but deep down, she knew that there was a special connection between the two of them.

"I can't promise that you'll become human," she whispered. "Because, well...I don't know if it's possible. Such a promise would have been a lie as big as a house, and friends don't lie to each other."

"That doesn't mean..."

"But it's true! And what's more, what does that mean, 'become human'? Have a body? You already have one here: you can make yourself look like a boy whenever you want. Although that won't be enough; there's also emotions, and the way you behave. That's what makes us truly human!"

The boy sat down on the grass in the park and rested his head on a closed fist. Aelita sat beside him.

In Washington D.C., it was just after six o'clock in the morning and Dido was asleep. Her office had a private bathroom and a dressing room in which she had installed a bed a few years earlier. During urgent times, she preferred not to stray too far from her centre of operations. And what was currently happening in France was indeed urgent in every way.

The telephone in the adjacent room began to ring. It was the sound of her secure line.

Dido leapt out of bed. She was already fully dressed. She paused for a brief moment to run her fingers through her short, blonde mane before, feeling completely awake, hurrying to answer.

On one of the walls of the office, just above the door, a line of identical clocks was hanging. Beneath each of them was a label showing the name of a different capital city from around the world.

The woman reached one of the handsets while glancing at this wall through the corner of her eye. In France, it was not long after midday.

“Dido,” she said into the receiver.

“Lone Wolf reporting in, ma'am,” said a tired yet resolute voice on the other end.

Dido remained silent as she listened to her agent’s brief report: he and his men had followed Hannibal Mago’s army to the factory on the small island, where the supercomputer was located; Grigory Nictapolus had discovered and captured them, tying them up and gagging them before transporting them out of the city; it had taken four days to free themselves, find a car and return to base. Four days, lost.

“Tell her we did the besst we could,” a voice interrupted Lone Wolf’s narration in the background. “That Grigory i sss a real ssssnake!”

Dido began to drum her fingers on the desk, irritated.

“Lone Wolf, restrain your men. Have you managed to contact Walter Stern yet?”

The agent coughed, ashamed, before continuing.

“Yes, Ma’am! But, you see, he told us this really confused story... And he wanted us to help him...”

As she listened to her subordinate, Dido’s eyes narrowed to form two tiny slits.

“Listen to me carefully,” she finally exclaimed. “This operation is of the utmost priority. I want Major Steinback, in other words, Professor Hertz, to take over. Do whatever she tells you to. There’s no time to lose. And one more thing, agent: go see a dentist!”

Dido hung up before her agent had time to protest. She knew that Lone Wolf wasn’t happy with the idea of going through emergency dental protocol, but she couldn’t allow the team to stay out of the game for much longer, given the delicate situation.

The woman buried these thoughts and concentrated on dialling another number on her telephone’s keypad. Maggie’s number.

Although it was very early, her secretary responded on the first ring with the cold and efficient tone of voice Dido truly appreciated.

“You need me, ma’am?”

“Yes, thank you,” responded Dido with a smile. “Pack your things and order for a private jet to be prepared. I’ll see you at the airport in an hour.”

“May I ask what our destination is?” asked Maggie without hesitation.

“We’re going to Paris, in France.”

She heard Maggie take a few notes on the side.

“Very well, ma’am,” she then said. “Would you like breakfast on our flight?”

Yumi, Odd and Jim Morales walked along Kadic Academy’s main path, heading towards the school’s large, iron gate.

Jim, the sports teacher, was a lot younger than the rest of the teachers and all the students were on friendly terms with him, treating him more like a larger friend than a teacher. Of a stocky physique, he always wore his hair short, held back from his forehead with a tennis sweatband. He also usually wore a band-aid on his cheek, which, according to him, made him seem tough as leather. But today, there were at least three band-aids, and not to mention the bandage covering his right ear. That was the only “serious injury” in the entire school from the battle the previous night.

All the members of the small group were armed: Odd with a compound bow and several arrows; Jim with a baseball bat; and Yumi, nunchaku. This Japanese weapon, composed of two short batons joined at one end with a chain, belonged to Ulrich, and Yumi’s thoughts were on him as she swung the weapon distractedly.

Several days earlier, the two of them had gone to Brussels and Ulrich had taken the bull by the horns and given her the famous “you and I are more than just friends” speech. Yumi had felt happy to hear it, but she hadn’t given him a response. They had been right in the middle of an urgent situation, with the men in black right on their heels after discovering they’d broken into one of their secret laboratories, and they had needed to get back to Kadic as fast as they could. At that confusing time she had thought that she would have the chance to reply later. But Ulrich was now trapped in Lyoko, and she couldn’t stay calm.

“Uugh,” Jim sighed from in front of her, “I should be in a bed in the infirmary, not here on guard duty.”

Odd let out a mocking laugh.

“I’m terribly sorry, Jimbo,” he said. The boy called him by this nickname each time he wanted to make fun of him. “You’ll have time to rest later. Now is the time to fight. And you need to set a good example.”

They were about a hundred metres from Kadic’s immense gate, resting between two brick columns on which the school emblem had been sculpted.

“What’s that over there?” Yumi asked, noticing yellow and black triangular signs with lightning drawn on them.

They were placed on short, metal pedestals, just the other side of the rungs of the gate. Further past the signs, they could see scaffolding on the footpath, strips of black and red tape like the ones that usually signal public construction,

and dozens of workers with helmets securely attached to their heads.

“How could they allow a construction site to open just in front of the school?” huffed Jim, indignant. “And without even asking the principal’s permission!”

The teacher lightly trod across the distance separating them from the fence and held out his arms to grasp the bars.

“Stop, Jim!” cried Yumi. “Don’t touch anything! I get what those signs mean now: high tension!”

The teacher stood frozen to the spot, and Odd approached him, pointing out the mess of barbed wire placed all along the top of the fencing surrounding Kadic.

“Yumi’s right, Jimbo. Look. I bet those rotten Green Phoenix guys want to...”

“What a smart kid.”

Yumi whipped around. The person who had just spoken was a worker in a yellow high-vis vest and a hard hat, observing them from the top of the gate. But when she looked closely, she could see that his clothing was just a disguise. The man was carrying a gun on his belt, and it was clear that his face was not that of a humble mason; his jaw was square, his eyes icy and his mouth twisted into an unsettling half-smile.

“Well then?” Jim exclaimed, taking every precaution to not even brush up against the gate. “Would you care to explain what it is you’re doing here?”

“Your brats have already figured it out,” the worker responded impishly. “We’ve electrified the entire perimeter. And thanks to this fake construction work, we can keep watch here, never letting you out of our sight, all without raising suspicions... Nobody can enter or leave without our say-so. We have the school under our control.”

Yumi watched the man turn around to return to his acolytes. For a split second, the girl thought about using her nunchaku. Yeah, and then what? She couldn’t get through the gate. She couldn’t stop the soldiers. She sighed.

“Come on, let’s go back,” she proposed to Jim and Odd. “There’s nothing more we can do here... And we need to warn the others quickly. Nobody can try to climb the fence or touch the bars of the gate.”

Yumi thought about her little brother. Hiroki had needed to spend the night at a cousin’s house, and now their parents would have to call and tell him that they still couldn’t see each other.

X.A.N.A. was separated into two halves.

A part of him, the dominant half, no longer had a physical body: from time to time it appeared between the trees or glaciers of Lyoko in the form of a light smoke, but it was almost always invisible and limited itself to studying and processing data.

The second half of the artificial intelligence, on the other hand, was trapped in the Mirror, and had the appearance of a

thirteen-year-old boy. At this moment, he was seated on the lawn of Kadic's park with Aelita.

X.A.N.A. was a very high-level program; he was used to handling dozens of tasks at the same time and could divide himself into a million different fragments if necessary. The fact that he was currently cut in two, straddled between Lyoko and the Mirror, didn't bother him in the least. The problem was something else. The part of him that took the form of a child also began to reason like a child. He let himself be carried away by his emotions, and this was not a good thing. Now, for example, he was wasting his time with Aelita. Why? The simulations of his calculations showed that there was a minute probability of this conversation being useful to him.

When Hopper had destroyed him, he had needed to reunite his dispersed fragments over the Internet and, to regain his strength, had taken control of the mind of a human, Eva Skinner. He may have spent too much time in the brain of that girl...

"Did you manage to open a connection between the Mirror and Lyoko?" Aelita asked him.

X.A.N.A. threw his head back and laughed.

"I didn't need to," he explained. "Your friend Jeremy opened the bridge that separated Lyoko from the First City, and I was able to regain my full strength that way. At first I had trouble communicating with the part of me in Lyoko, but everything has been resolved now."

“So,” the girl said, “you haven’t even tried to get out of here...?”

X.A.N.A. tilted his head and narrowed his eyes. That was an interesting question.

“Hopper included a security system in the Mirror,” he explained, concentrating. “In the virtual world we’re in now, to interact with objects, you need to have the command box in your hand. But, to activate the supercomputer to then enter Lyoko, the Lyoko of 1994, you need to perform lots of operations at the one time: turn on the supercomputer on the third floor, use the terminal on the first and, finally, enter the scanner columns on the second underground floor.”

“And you can’t do all that,” Aelita said to him, nodding pensively, “on your own.”

X.A.N.A. shrugged.

“I don’t need the box; I can send the instructions directly to the computer controlling the sandbox. But Hopper really studied the system. All those things need to be done at the same moment by three different people. The computer identifies me as a single entity, and so you’re right: I can’t do it. But that doesn’t matter to me. I already have everything I need.”

Aelita became silent, nervous, and began to fiddle with the gold necklace around her neck.

“Why is it that every time you become worried,” X.A.N.A. said to her with a smile, “you start playing with the transmitter?”

The girl stopped and shook her head.

“What transmitter?”

X.A.N.A. stood up. Poor little humans. They never see any further than the tips of their noses.

“*That* transmitter!” he exclaimed. “The one you always wear around your neck!”

Aelita realised that he was talking about her necklace.

“But if that’s...” she hesitated, “this is the necklace my father left to me.”

“It’s a transmitter,” X.A.N.A. insisted. “I can sense the circuits inside. It can be used to send a call signal to another identical transmitter.”

Aelita took her necklace off and began to observe it in the intense light of the sun.

“Seriously?” she asked, incredulous. “This has circuits in it? And can you tell me where the other one is?”

The boy shook his head.

“It doesn’t contain a GPS device, so no, I can’t localise it. But we can activate it. The signal will be blocked by the Mirror, but I can transmit it to the part of me that’s inside Lyoko, and from there, into reality.”

“And...what will happen?”

X.A.N.A. was growing tired of so much chit-chat. Plus, it’d be easier just to show her. He approached the girl and took the necklace in between his fingers. It was a flat and circular medallion, about two centimetres in diameter. In appearance, it seemed like a massive piece of gold, but X.A.N.A.

was capable of effortlessly seeing how it really worked. He pressed a thumb onto the lower part of the necklace and turned it clockwise, until he heard a small *click*.

On the side of the medallion facing him, the letters *W* and *A* became illuminated with a faint, reddish light.

“It’s now turned on,” he said. “Now you just have to press one of the two letters, and the corresponding transmitter will begin to project a resplendent light. Do you want to do it?”

Aelita approached him and placed a hand on his shoulder. With a fingertip, she very lightly brushed the letter *W*. The sailor’s knot blinked three times, then went back to normal.

X.A.N.A. handed the necklace to the girl and winked.

“Signal sent,” he said.

4

PARACHUTISTS RAIN ON KADIC



Memory had been at work for hours, bent over the command post of the supercomputer. All around her, the first floor of the factory was teeming with activity. Soldiers in uniform for guerrilla warfare were circulating all about with walkie-talkies crackling away and machinery that constantly roared in the background... On the pivoting platform in the centre of the room, the three-dimensional projection of the virtual world of Lyoko still continued to rotate, illuminated with colourful text and labels that appeared and disappeared.

But Memory neither saw nor heard a thing, so long as she was concentrated on the mysterious code that was contained in the palm-computer. She had finally managed to decipher

the first part. It was a complex activation program with instructions written in Hoppix, the programming language that Professor Hopper had invented to create Lyoko.

This man had been a true genius, and Memory felt an instinctive sense of sympathy for him.

The real problem was the second part of the code – a series of unconnected and incomprehensible characters and symbols. The woman believed that among them she could see a sly message written in code and had shuffled through all the possibilities, but she wasn't getting anywhere.

Whatever this program was, she needed to find out as quickly as possible. Hannibal Mago wouldn't tolerate any failures, and Memory had learned that efficiency was the only way to keep herself safe from his rage.

The woman felt her neck trembling. She thought at first that it was only a symptom of fatigue from working so much. But the trembling continued, slightly intensified. Memory brought her fingers to the necklace that she was wearing and realised that it was the source of the strange sensation.

She removed the thin, golden chain from the medallion on which a sailor's knot and the letters *W* and *A* were engraved. She just had time to notice that the knot was now blinking and the letter *W* was illuminated before collapsing on the keyboard, unconscious.

The First City was floating in the colourless like a cloud carrying blue buildings. It had once been surrounded by a

very tall, black wall that acted as a firewall that Jeremy had been forced to take down. Now, nothing was separating the children from the infinite abyss that surrounded around them. It provoked a real sense of vertigo.

Eva Skinner pointed to a very long, suspended bridge that stood at a terrifying angle, leading away from the city and reaching out to the horizon.

“And you want to go...there?” she asked. “That’ll be a real pain! In my opinion, it would be better if we returned to the park. Or if you come with me to explore the city.”

Jeremy and Ulrich exchanged looks. There was no doubt that Eva was very kind, but coexisting with her was becoming more and more difficult.

“I already explained it to you before,” exclaimed Jeremy. “We can’t stay here dawdling around while our friends are in danger. First thing’s first, we need to get to Lyoko on the other side of the bridge. Then, we’ll see if we find something there.”

“And why would being over there help you think up some brilliant idea that you couldn’t just think up over here?” Eva asked him, looking at him with a defiant smile. “The truth is you’re acting blindly, four-eyed elf.”

Jeremy raised his nose, humiliated. It wasn’t his fault that he took on such a ridiculous form on Lyoko, what with these green stockings and pointed ears.

“Eva, we’re going to go, but if you prefer, you can stay here. Sooner or later, we’ll come back to look for you,” said Ulrich in a hasty tone of voice.

“You can’t be serious!” protested the young girl, offended.

“Ah, I forgot...” Ulrich started to say, turning to Jeremy and winking. “Remember the hexagonal castle in the middle of the city? Well, at one point, Jeremy and I walked that way, and the bridge lowered, and a tonne of robots dressed as medieval knights that seemed pretty evil started to come across. Just in case you encounter any of them, take my word and run away as fast as you can.”

Ulrich took Jeremy by the arm, and they turned together towards the bridge. It was only surrounded by two lowered railings and was suspended above the void. Under their feet was the abyss. They began to walk towards Lyoko, one beside the other.

Several seconds later, they heard the steps of the young girl behind them, rushing to catch up to them.

Odd was on the large terrace on the top floor of the dormitory. It was five o’ clock in the afternoon, and the sun looked like a giant, pink grapefruit playing hide-and-seek behind the tips of the trees. It was cold out, and the boy was shivering in his coat, but he had no desire to go back inside and join the others.

Odd had never been a big fan of school. Ok, to be precise, he loved being with his friends and cracking jokes with all

the pretty girls that crossed his path, but he couldn't stand the strictness, all the absurd rules (like the one that forbade students from keeping pets), the classes, and the punishments. Throughout the years, he had managed to rack up lots of punishments without paying them too much mind, but things had now gotten worse. His parents were at Kadac, and they were watching him every minute of the day.

He was convinced that he had already demonstrated how capable he was during their reunion this morning, but his success had only lasted for about half an hour. The principal and Professor Hertz had then taken control of the situation again and excluded the children.

But it wasn't them that had fought against X.A.N.A. for so long, nor was it them who had finally defeated him, saving the world as well. They hadn't helped Aelita escape from the supercomputer where she had been held prisoner. They hadn't discovered the secret room below the Hermitage. It wasn't fair. Not at all.

The school was silent all around Odd. Throughout the park meandered patrols of teachers and students, and from the other side of the gate and the fence, Odd could see Hannibal Mago's men seemingly working on their sketchy projects. They had set up large projectors to illuminate the school at all hours of the night and continued to survey the area.

The noises of the city reached him as far off, faded echoes. He heard the horns of cars on the main road, the cries of

children playing at the neighbourhood sports field, the plane...

Odd raised his head. There was a plane above him, which was quite strange. Kadic was far enough from the airport that he had never seen them fly above the school before.

He wondered if it belonged to the terrorists from Green Phoenix, who weren't happy about the school being closed off and were planning to attack it from the air.

The boy's suspicions were confirmed only a few seconds later. The plane turned widely in the sky, then opened its enormous, metal stomach from which something began to exit... Small, black dots falling at high speed... Parachutists!

Odd grabbed his phone to call Yumi.

"Where are you?" he cried.

"In the courtyard by the cafeteria," the young girl answered him. "I'm making rounds with Jim and..."

"Meet up in front of the administration building right away. You have to sound the alert immediately. Men with parachutes from the Green Phoenix are descending on the school!"

Odd ended the conversation without giving his friend time to respond and ran off. He rushed down the stairway at full speed, sprinted inside the corridor and leaped through the glass doorway of the dormitory that had been destroyed during the battle and was barely hanging, like a broken wing.

Instead of continuing down the narrow path, he took a shortcut across the grass without taking his eyes off the sky.

The plane had accomplished its mission and was now pulling away towards the horizon, while the small, black dots still approached in the twilight. Odd calculated that they would land in the middle of the park, just before the small forest.

He sped up even faster... And his whole body crashed into something. He fell to the ground.

“Ouch!” he yelped.

“I’m the one who should be saying that,” exclaimed Principal Delmas.

The boy shook his head and looked all around. Beside the principal, who was enveloped in an elegant, camel-coloured coat, were the Ishiyamas and his parents, and they were all looking at him with troubled expressions. None of them were armed.

“What are you waiting for?” cried Odd with a feline-like jump. “We need to prepare to fight against those Green Phoenix brutes!”

Professor Hertz let out a tired smile.

“Those aren’t the terrorists, Odd,” she told him slowly. “They are the men in black’s parachutists. They came to help us.”

Yumi also arrived at this moment, running at full speed, with Jim following a short distance behind, huffing and puffing.

“I tried to tell you on the phone!” the young girl explained. “But you wouldn’t listen to me.”

Odd placed his hand on his head, dispirited. He had built up some hope of proving his worth to the adults in some grandiose fashion, but instead, he only managed to make himself look like an idiot.

At that instant, three agents landed a small distance from them. They undid the parachute cables as quickly as possible and headed towards them confidently, while six cases were placed on the ground behind them.

“I know them,” murmured Yumi. “They’re the same ones that chased Ulrich and I through Brussels.”

The first agent removed his air suit, revealing a black suit and tie of the same colour. Even though it was almost night-time, he was wearing sunglasses. He gave a salute to Professor Hertz.

“Major Steinback, I am agent Lone Wolf. And these agents with me are Ferret and Weasel. At your command.”

“Does this bridge ever end?” Ulrich whined.

“We’re almost there,” Jeremy replied to his friend with a smile.

Eva remained silent, but the annoyance in her eyes spoke more than a thousand words. All three of them were very tired. They hadn’t eaten in a long time, and the suspended bridge gave them a terrible feeling of vertigo. Furthermore, Jeremy had another problem on his hands: while he had taken this path before when going from Lyoko to the First City, the boy had used Code Aelita to be able to reach a very high

precipice, but now, they would need to cross it heading down to arrive at the core of Lyoko, and he hadn't the slightest idea how to cross such a chasm.

Let's figure this out in stages. First one problem, and then another, he thought to himself. *For now, we just need to get to our destination.*

"JEREMY!"

The overbearing voice made him jump in fright.

"Did you hear that?" said the boy, turning towards his friends.

"No. What?" he answered Ulrich with an inquisitive look.

The voice came back. It entered directly into his ear as if through an earpiece.

"Do you hear me, Jeremy? I am Hannibal Mago."

The boy stopped in his tracks and motioned towards Ulrich to stop.

"I hear you," he replied. "But I can't say that I'm too pleased to speak with you."

He heard crazy, rough laughter.

"Haven't I already told you how much you amuse me, kid? You must have guts if you can be so insolent with me. But don't push your luck," Mago paused briefly before continuing. "I am about to remove you from Lyoko."

"Whaaat?" exclaimed Jeremy. "And my friends?"

"They'll remain there. I have no need of them. But you'll need to leave. I have a job for you."

Jeremy grit his teeth. He had no intention to help these criminals anymore.

“You better do what I say,” continued the man. “Remember what happened the first time we didn’t see eye to eye, don’t you? Your girlfriend’s mother is here with me, and you don’t want something bad to happen to her. You would never forgive yourself.”

Jeremy knew that he had no way to refuse. Even though Anthea was working for the Green Phoenix, she was still Aelita’s mother. And he couldn’t allow Mago to harm her.

“Fine then,” he said. “What do you want me to do?”

“Remember your friend Richard’s palm-computer? Well, I want you to study its code for me. And I also want you to decipher Hertz’s file.”

“Yes, sir,” Jeremy muttered, reluctantly. “Though I’m warning you that I’ll need to use the...”

“No Internet,” Mago interrupted him. “Do you take me for an idiot? The first thing you’d do is contact your friends at Kadic Academy. So, no. But you may use the Lyoko terminal. That seems like more than enough to me.”

“Ok,” sighed Jeremy.

“And now, say goodbye to your little friends. I’ve already set up the materialisation procedure here.”

The voice evaporated from Jeremy’s ear with a final click.

Eva and Ulrich looked at him, perplexed. As far as they could see, the boy had merely been talking to himself just now.

Jeremy summarised the situation for them. They needed to say goodbye.

“But you can’t leave us here all alone!” cried Eva.

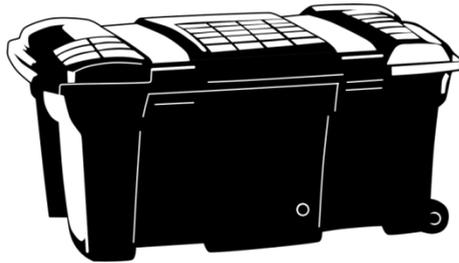
“Eva’s right. We don’t know how to reach the core of Lyoko,” added Ulrich.

Jeremy tried to answer them, but realised that his voice was no longer there. His feet had risen several centimetres above the flat surface of the bridge and were levitating in the air.

He closed his eyes. He was about to return to the real world.

5

COMPUTER VIRUS



With nightfall, the terrible cold had also returned to Kadic Academy. The boilers still weren't working. And even though the men in black had brought a thermostat with them, they hadn't succeeded in installing it yet. Although they had at least managed to fix the generators.

Odd, Yumi and Richard were squatting outside the short lunchroom building, electric lights shining behind them.

"It really isn't fair," grumbled Odd as he wrapped himself up in his jacket. "We're the protagonists of this story: we did everything up until now, all by ourselves, and we made it out fine. And this is what happens when we add parents and teachers into the mix. They think they know everything!"

"Yeah," Yumi admitted, "they didn't even let us participate in their meeting tonight."

Odd glanced at Richard out of the corner of his eye, listening to them completely enveloped in his large coat.

He was the only one that had been allowed into the principal's office. It was absurd: Richard had always remained on the side-lines until now. And all just because he was twenty-three!

"Can you tell us what Professor Hertz and the men in black decided?"

Richard shrugged. His freckled nose emerged from the upturned collar of his coat.

"Well," he responded, "they agreed to act tonight. When the students are asleep, Hertz, Walter Stern and the three agents will infiltrate the Hermitage. Your parents will be with them too, Yumi. As well as Jeremy's father, who's going to help Hertz activate the scanner. The objective is to get Aelita out of the Mirror and free the others from Lyoko."

"But what's their plan? They can't leave the school, and it's obvious that they can't attack the barrier separating the house from the school!"

"They're going underground," explained Richard. "Through the sewers."

"But we flooded them!"

"Precisely," the boy said, shrugging again. "The men in black brought a stack of diving equipment. They've practically thought of everything."

At that moment, Odd would have loved to be able to talk to Jeremy. His friend's brain was like a magician's top hat,

always bursting with fantastic plans and ingenious ideas. But now, however, he was alone. Or rather, he was with Richard and Yumi.

They were going to have to cope.

“They thought of everything, but they didn’t know how many people would go on the mission with them,” Yumi reflected. “I mean, they probably brought spare equipment. We could steal it from them and then follow them through the sewers and get to the Hermitage ourselves.”

Odd observed Yumi with sincere admiration. Now that was a real fantastic idea! They could join the adults’ expedition, giving an important contribution to the fight against the Green Phoenix!

They just had one problem.

“None of us know how to use the oxygen canisters and all those frogmen things,” he observed.

Richard then decided to respond.

“Well, you see, actually...”

“Yes?”

“I’m a scuba-diving instructor. It’s my favourite pastime.”

Surprised, Odd looked the young man from head to toe. A smile then began to spread across his face.

X.A.N.A. was seated on the sofa in the Hermitage’s living room. Aelita was snuggled beside him, the Mirror command box in one hand and a steaming-hot cup of tea in the other.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing,” the girl replied. “I’m just a little sad.”

Her father was dead and her mother had been kidnapped when she was very little. But the message her father had left, as well as the necklace he had left to her, gave her hope that Anthea may still be alive. And when X.A.N.A. had revealed that the medallion was actually a transmitter, Aelita had felt a small, fragile spark of hope light in her chest. She may be able to get in contact with her!

But unfortunately, nothing had happened. Her mother hadn’t responded and Aelita’s necklace was now dim again.

Maybe my mother is dead too, she thought. Maybe I really have been left all alone.

At that moment, X.A.N.A. closed his eyes.

“Incoming communication,” he murmured. “I think it’s your friend Jeremy.”

Aelita leapt up.

“Jeremy? But where...?”

“He’s not here. He’s at Lyoko’s command post, in the old factory. Can I also participate in the conversation? I just need to enter the data flux, it’s child’s play.”

Aelita nodded and immediately heard Jeremy’s voice in her ear.

“Psst! Aelita! Can you hear me?”

“JEREMY!” cried the girl. “What...?”

“I need to act fast. It’s the middle of the night here and they’ve left me alone for a minute for the changing of the guard. But they’ll be here soon.”

The children quickly updated each other on their respective adventures.

Aelita discovered the latest news: Grigory had kidnapped Jeremy and forced him to enter Lyoko, and then come out again to decrypt the codes in Hertz's dossier and Richard's palm-computer.

She told him everything she had discovered in the Mirror and about the transmitter necklace.

"Yes," Jeremy whispered. "Well, you see..."

Aelita sensed hesitation in her friend's voice.

"See what?"

"Nothing, nothing. I'll tell you another time, maybe. I just wanted to say hi to you, see if you're doing ok. And tell you that one way or another, I will get you out of there."

X.A.N.A., who had been listening in silence, decided to intervene at this moment.

"So Mago has charged you with the task of decrypting the codes? And what do you need to do? Activate the Code Down?"

Aelita remembered when Professor Hertz had spoken about the Code Down. Eva had been present at the time, and X.A.N.A. had been possessing her. It was obvious he knew everything.

According to Hertz, the Code Down was a very powerful program, capable of permanently destroying the world of Lyoko, deactivating the supercomputer definitively. Could Jeremy be intent on using it?

“You’re an ally of the Green Phoenix,” Jeremy retorted in an icy tone. “You shouldn’t be afraid of them.”

“It’s true that part of me is associated with the terrorists,” X.A.N.A. confessed to Aelita. “But I’m unfaithful, I don’t trust anybody. Hannibal Mago promised to help me become human. And in exchange, for the moment, I have offered him my collaboration.”

Aelita heard Jeremy burst out laughing.

“Is that what he told you? Mago’s nothing but a liar. He lied to you, just like the others: he’s not capable of making you human. Nobody is capable of it.”

“Professor Hopper was making progress!” X.A.N.A. protested. “I was learning to be like you! But then something happened...”

“Exactly,” affirmed Jeremy. “And I can tell you exactly what happened: you were infected by a virus.”

X.A.N.A. balled his fists. That brat! How dare he treat him this way? He was the lord and master of the virtual world! He was the most complex artificial intelligence man had ever constructed!

“I found out while studying the First City,” explained Jeremy. “Hopper created you – he gave you life, you could say – so that in the future, you could become the digital equivalent of a human being. That’s why Aelita went to see you in the First City: to teach you the mystery of human emotions. Aelita trusted you, and her father.

“However, he hadn’t taken the castle into account. Hopper had activated the firewall, the huge black wall, to isolate the castle and protect it. But he forgot that you were also inside the firewall, and that as a consequence, your program codes weren’t protected. And to top it all off, you were still growing. You were just like a child, and your interior barriers weren’t yet completely formed. In the end, I think the castle ‘infected’ you, and gave you much greater powers than Hopper originally had in mind for you.

“But there was a price to pay in exchange. You forgot Aelita. You forgot everything except the core of your computer. I haven’t been able to access your code and so I don’t have mathematical certainty, but I’m sure that that’s what happened. Aelita’s teachings and her friendship left their mark on you, and when you lost them, you felt a void that you tried to fill...in the wrong way, trying to fight against Hopper, and blocking out all emotions except for one: hate.”

X.A.N.A. felt himself boil with rage. It was a red and brilliant energy that coursed through his child body. He wanted to take the energy from his main entity to disintegrate the Mirror and erase this reality forever.

Could Jeremy possibly be right? All these problems, this constant fighting with himself... Was it all because of a simple computer virus?

“How did you find out?” he asked.

Jeremy cleared his throat.

“I already told you: by studying the First City’s operational code. Plus, I linked together all the clues we’ve found so far in my head. If you think about it for a moment, it all fits.”

X.A.N.A. didn’t know how to respond. Aelita placed a hand on his shoulder. She gave him a smile, warm and friendly.

“Is there a way to eradicate the virus?” X.A.N.A. then asked.

“I don’t know,” Jeremy responded. “I don’t have access to your program codes.”

“But I have them!” exclaimed X.A.N.A. “I can run an auto-analysis program on myself to identify the...”

Aelita slowly shook her head.

“That’s not how humans deal with their problems,” she whispered. “If you’ve forgotten your emotions, you can still find them again. And learn to trust your friends. That’s what we do. If you’d like, I can give you a hand.”

Yumi slithered quietly between the shadows in the park, stepping lightly. Here and there she could see lanterns, bobbing and swinging in the darkness. Footsteps from people on rounds. But she was dressed in black and knew that they wouldn’t see her.

She continued towards the gymnasium, where the men in black had hidden the crates with all the equipment. In her pocket, she had a small piece of paper with the list of things she needed to acquire.

Odd would have given an arm and a leg to be able to join her on this mission, but Yumi had insisted on going alone.

She reached one of the bushes on the border of the park. Before her stood the gymnasium, a low and wide building with a large front door that faced towards her. The windows on the sides of the small building were dark. There was someone in front of the large door. Lone Wolf had left one of the agents behind to keep watch.

The gymnasium had no other entries, and the windows were closed, but the girl wouldn't be discouraged. She continued to move between the trees, protected by the shadows of the night, skirting the building. She burst out of the bushes and glued her back to the wall like a suction cup. She then began to move silently towards the man. She heard him speaking on the telephone.

"Yesss Mum... No... But I can't wear a wool jacket! We need to wear ssscuba sssuits! Yesss, ok, alright..."

Yumi covered her mouth with her hand to stop herself from laughing. She recognised the voice: it was Ferret, the secret agent that talked somewhat strangely. It would be easy for her to outwit him.

Cautiously, Yumi stuck her head around the corner of the wall to take a look. The large door was open, held there by an upside-down lantern on the floor to stop it from closing. No sound could be heard from inside the gymnasium. There must have been nobody in there.

At that moment, the man had his back facing her and was holding his phone to his ear, continuing to talk to his mother.

Yumi rummaged in her jacket pocket and removed one of the two firecrackers that had come directly from Odd's "secret reserve for vandalism." She lit the first one with a lighter, threw it so it would land ten metres from Ferret and waited.

The explosion came a few seconds later, breaking the night's tranquillity.

"Who did that?" yelled the agent in a piercing voice. He then dug into his black vest to take out his gun.

Yumi lit the second firecracker and threw it further away. Another explosion.

"Who goesss there?!" Ferret shouted as he ran towards where the firecracker had exploded. "Handsss in the air, or I'll sssshoot!"

Yumi seized the opportunity to dash between the shadows behind him. She slipped through the open door, took the lantern off the ground and closed the door behind her.

She made it.

The gymnasium was empty. The girl used the lantern to illuminate the enormous space. She saw the still-green linoleum floor, the posts, the nets and the asymmetric parallel bars for climbing. She then spotted several crates in a corner. On the cover of each she saw a label revealing its contents: *WEAPONS, CLIMBING, EXPLOSIVES...* Finally, Yumi found the *UNDERWATER EXPLORATION* crate.

Yumi took the list Richard had written out of her pocket. She never would have imagined they'd need so many things to go diving. She needed to get masks and wetsuits, flippers, weights and self-draining adjustable hydrostatic jackets. And then there were air tanks, of course, and not to mention the dispensing valves, pressure gauges and depth gauges. Richard had tried to explain to her what each of these things looked like.

Yumi threw the lids off the crates and scanned their contents.

Everything was much different from what she'd imagined. To start, the masks weren't like the ones she'd always seen in movies; they covered the whole face and seemed imposing and menacing. And then the air tanks which, instead of being oblong in shape, were celestial blue backpacks coated in plastic.

The girl checked the sizes and found a pair of adequate wetsuits for Odd and herself, and another larger one for Richard. She then looked for the rest of the equipment and, figuring she'd might as well, also took three knives and underwater lanterns.

She heard Ferret bash his fists against the door.

"What a stupid prank! And now I'm stuck outside and I'm going to have to call Lone Wolf!"

She hadn't much time left.

Yumi arranged the contents of the crates so as to cover up the absence of the equipment she'd taken, and then began to take her haul into the storeroom.

The girl needed to make three trips to transport everything: the diving equipment weighed a tonne. Once she was done, she key-locked the storeroom and sent a message to Odd's phone.

6

VENTURE INTO THE HERMITAGE



“I don’t trust Jeremy,” declared X.A.N.A.

Aelita sat beside him on the couch. Jeremy had interrupted the conversation abruptly when Mago’s soldiers approached, and she and X.A.N.A. were now alone once more.

Aelita took the young man’s hand.

“Don’t you get it? Jeremy’s theory explains everything. You and I used to be friends, but they hurt me, so I couldn’t come see you, and then the virus inside of you was activated. Then, you lost your emotions and became something different. A machine. The machine that killed my father...”

Aelita felt her heart start to beat harder. She could only think about how X.A.N.A. had murdered her father. He sacri-

ficed himself to destroy this invention, his invention that had gone out of control, once and for all.

“But now you’re different from the X.A.N.A. that I battled against on Lyoko,” she continued. “So if you want, you can help us.”

“How? I told Jeremy that we could create new robots to use against Green Phoenix, but he didn’t want to.”

The young girl forced herself to smile.

“It’d be best not to alert the terrorists, at least for the time being. For now, we can spend a bit of time together, get to know each other better and catch up on lost years. You’ll see, something will come up sooner or later, and we’ll be back in action.”

She stood up. She was tired of being cooped up inside the Hermitage. Outside, it was a splendid, summer afternoon, and she wanted to breathe a bit of fresh air.

“Come with me,” she proposed. “Let’s go for a walk.”

Yumi heard the noise of small rocks hitting the window. It was Odd. Just like they had planned, he didn’t reply to her message, but came at full speed.

The young girl looked at her watch. A quarter past midnight. The men in black had come to the gym not long ago and took the cases full of equipment before leaving. They were preparing for the mission. And now it was their turn.

The young girl agilely climbed up the stairs covered with weights and medicine balls, opened the window of the gym and stuck her head outside.

Odd and Richard waved to her.

“Wait here!” she whispered.

She climbed down the stairs, grabbed a large oxygen container and tossed it to her friends through the open window. She continued until she ran out of equipment to throw to them, then slipped through to the other side of the window herself.

Yumi, trying to catch her breath from all the effort, stared at Richard.

“Well?” she asked. “Did I get it all?”

“Yes, it's fine...” the young man replied to her with a smile. “It's not exactly the equipment I was hoping for though. These are military rebreathers. In other words, they function by recycling the air exhaled. They're very quiet and have the advantage of not creating any bubbles underwater.”

“Wow!” exclaimed Odd, always excited by anything out of the ordinary.

“The problem is that they're a bit complicated to use. I'll need to make sure I correctly explain how to use them.”

“And we'll learn it by heart,” said Yumi, giving Odd a wink. “At this hour, the others have already dived in, I'm sure.”

“Oof!” exhaled Eva. “We've been here for an hour, and I'm starting to get bored!”

Ulrich signed and looked up to the sky. They had arrived at the very edge of the bridge that ended over an immense, hollow cylinder that seemed to be made of blue rocks. The cylinder had no hand grips, and it was so deep that it seemed to go on forever. To fall from this height... Well, really, Ulrich didn't know if that would kill him or not. They were inside Lyoko, and on this world, there were no bones to be broken, only life points to be lost. However, who knows what would happen if he were to fall all the way down? He hadn't the slightest desire to find out.

"Hey," Eva called out to him. "Mind telling me why you aren't replying to me? Do you have a problem with me, by chance?"

"Can't you shut up even for a moment?!" Ulrich burst out. "I'm thinking about what we should do. If we don't find a way to get down, we'll need to head all the way back to the First City."

Eva sat at the edge of the bridge, her eyebrows furrowed.

"I shouldn't have to follow you and four-eyes around. You're nothing but a couple of brats."

With that, Ulrich lamented at how well Eva had learned his language. But a noise then caught his attention.

It was a repetitive brushing sound, like the sound of pages in a book being leafed through at full speed. And it was becoming stronger and stronger. The boy unsheathed the katana that he was carrying at his side and stood *en garde*. His

samurai sword was a blade so bright that it seemed as if it a light were shining out from it.

“What are you doing?” said Eva while jumping to her feet.

“Stay on your toes,” murmured Ulrich. “They’re coming.”

The Manta Rays zoomed out of the chasm. There were two large, white and black creatures. They had long, triangular bodies that worked as fins or wings and that ended in a long, pointed tail.

The creatures had neither eyes nor mouths, but two small horns that extended from their snouts.

“What are those things??” yelled Eva.

“A pair of X.A.N.A.’s monsters,” replied Ulrich.

The boy more tightly grasped the hilt of his sword, preparing for combat.

“Don’t be afraid. This time, the Mantas aren’t here to attack you.”

The voice that had just spoken was deep and seemed to come from all directions at once.

“You’re X.A.N.A.,” cried Ulrich. “What do you want with us?”

“Jeremy is in contact with Aelita and I in the Mirror. We came to a sort of...agreement.”

Ulrich didn’t know what to do. He didn’t trust X.A.N.A. at all. He was the enemy, the one who had put them through a lot of hard times, and against whom they had battled countless times without end. But for now, the Manta Rays had not fired their lasers.

“I came here to bring you to a safe place,” the voice continued. “Jeremy and I are about to come up with a plan to face the Green Phoenix, and your friend wishes for you two to help us, even if I don’t see how you could. Thus, the decision is yours.”

With a firm flap of their wings, the Manta Rays descended from above them in a circle until landing on the surface of the bridge, in wait.

Eva smiled, clapped for joy, and got on top of the Manta Ray closest to her. She grabbed the creature’s small horns as if they were reins.

“This is so cool!” she cried out in English, before continuing in French. “A thousand times better than the horse-riding classes at Meredith School! My friends will die of jealousy.”

“Ok, fine,” cried Ulrich, unheard, while he sheathed his sword. “Take us wherever it is you wish.”

Then, he mounted the other Manta Ray.

It was a moonless night, and the park at Kadic seemed to be fast asleep.

Odd felt himself shiver in his wetsuit. He left the large manhole cover on the ground. Then, he stood to see Yumi and Richard. He had to cover his mouth with both hands so as not to burst out in laughter.

Yumi seemed as if she had transformed into an astronaut. Her hair was tightly packed into the hood of her suit, and the diving mask was completely covering her face. Two large,

dark tubes ran from her mouth to her back, like a pair of tentacles that connected to the oxygen container backpack.

Richard turned towards Odd with a smile on his face.

“Don’t laugh too hard, it’s your turn now!”

The young man repeated all the instructions from beginning to end on how to use the rebreather and helped Odd to put on the equipment.

“Perfect,” exclaimed Richard lastly. “It’s a very short trip from here to the Hermitage. Plus, you only have to remember to follow me very closely. Everything clear?”

Odd tried to speak, but his lips only let out a grumble. The mask reeked of plastic and made him feel like he was suffocating.

While Richard finished putting on his wetsuit and gear, Odd focused the underwater light in the direction of the sewers. After only a slight drop, the sickly surface of the river could be seen.

He had travelled with the rest of the group down these tunnels numerous times before to reach the factory or the Hermitage, but now, with the sewers flooded, it was more of an adventure. The only thing that grossed him out a bit was the idea of submerging in these stinky waters.

Richard passed by close to him, moving his ridiculous finned feet like some kind of frogman. He then adjusted his mask on his face and jumped into the sewers, splashing Odd up to his head.

A second later, Yumi did the same.

Odd watched as his two friends disappeared into the small well, figured it was too late to turn back now, then dived in after them.

The water was murky and freezing cold. In front of his mask, particles were drifting by that he thought were better left unidentified, illuminated only by his light. He felt as if the weights that he'd attached to his waist were dragging him down. He adjusted the life-vest (Richard called it a BCD) until he felt it was adequate and then looked around.

He wasn't able to make out a thing, not even the walls of the tunnel. Everything was too dark, and the water was very dirty. Odd needed to force himself not to vomit. He was lucky to have the mask preventing him from smelling everything! But the idea that this water was filtered in the wetsuit and that he was bathing in it...

He finally noticed the lights, two small twin sparks that were waiting for him a short distance away. The boy moved the fins on his feet slowly until reaching Richard and Yumi. When he saw them, Richard raised his hand with a thumb up and began to swim through the tunnel. Yumi and Odd followed him.

Jeremy was seated in front of the command post of the supercomputer, on the first underground floor of the factory.

It was on these very screens that he had seen Aelita for the first time, and from here that he had guided his friends through their innumerable, virtual adventures. But everything

was different now. Two soldiers from the Green Phoenix were posted behind him, observing him with glassy eyes, while he tried to decipher the codes from Richard's palm-computer.

Jeremy had consulted Memory's notes and agreed with the woman's conclusions: the palm-computer contained an activation program, but there was no human way of understanding what it should activate. This was the most complicated code that he had ever analysed in his entire life. It didn't make any sense!

The boy took off his large, round glasses and cleaned them with the bottom of his shirt. At least, he had succeeded in contacting Aelita and spoke with X.A.N.A. Somehow, it seemed that his friend had managed to get through to the artificial intelligence, drawing him to their side. And he could prove to be a worthy ally.

"You two, outside. You're distracting him like that!"

Jeremy turned around in the pivoting chair. The doors of the elevator closed behind Memory. The woman was clothed in her usual white lab coat, but she had a different expression now. Her eyes were encircled by small wrinkles from worry.

The soldiers gave a salute and left, walking out as rigidly as two marionettes.

Memory addressed Jeremy with a tired smile, and he noticed that she was no longer wearing her gold necklace. Aelita had said that hers was activated... Could it be that the transmitter had truly worked?

“You seem surprised,” the woman said. “Why?”

“Your necklace...”

Memory’s cheeks became the same scarlet colour as her hair, and she removed the necklace from the pocket of her coat with two fingers.

“I didn’t want Mago to see it,” she murmured. “I wasn’t feeling well this afternoon, and I passed out. That’s why they immediately made you leave Lyoko. But I’m feeling better now.”

“Oh, you don’t seem so well though,” replied Jeremy.

The woman made neither a reference to Aelita nor to Hopper. The boy thought for a moment if he should divert the conversation topic to his friend, but then decided not to say anything. It could be dangerous.

Memory had been working for Hannibal Mago all of these years, and he’d risk putting Aelita and the rest of his friends in danger.

The woman pointed to the main screen at the commands.

“Have you made any progress with the code?” she asked him.

“Not yet,” Jeremy responded, lowering his head. “I haven’t managed to find the common thread. It generally just looks like a confusing mish-mash.”

“Well, then,” said Memory with a wink. “Let’s just put that aside for the moment and concentrate on the First City instead. The castle is a powerful weapon, and it should not end

up in the wrong hands... I want to study it carefully. Do you want to help me?"

Jeremy nodded in silence.

Odd was stunned by the deep silence down below. The rebreather made practically no noise, and the boy could only hear the inhaling and exhaling of his own breath. Richard and Yumi's fins undulated in front of his face as soft shadows.

They had crossed a labyrinth that seemed so strange and new to Odd, much different than the path that he had taken by foot millions of times before.

The circular sewer tunnel had now been transformed into a long, narrow passageway. The children travelled down it until reaching the end and swimming up, following a flooded staircase dug out in the cement. After that, the water level began to drop.

Richard pushed himself off the stairs and raised his head, exiting the water.

"Phew!" exclaimed Odd, removing his mask. "Another minute of silence, and I was going to explode!"

"Talk quieter," Yumi warned him. "The Green Phoenix soldiers could be just around the corner."

Odd looked all around him. The steps disappeared behind his back under a cloak of cold, dirty water. In front of him, on the other side, there was a door that the boy recognised im-

mediately. It was the one separating the underground passage from bottom floors of the Hermitage. They were here.

“This water stinks!” he complained. “I’m starting to feel like throwing up.”

Before he could finish speaking, the metal door opened, and a hand holding a gun appeared.

Richard let out a small cry and slipped on the wet steps, falling on his back into the water with a loud splash.

“Don’t shoot!” Odd rushed to yell out, while raising his arms. A face emerged from above the hand that the boy didn’t recognise at first. The person was wearing glasses and had grey hair tucked in the hood of a wetsuit.

“What are you doing here?” asked Professor Hertz.

“Well, you see, we...we came to give you a hand.”

Hertz lowered her head in resignation. She helped Richard out of the water. The young boy looked like a scared puppy. Odd couldn’t believe his eyes. The professor was holding a giant gun in both hands and looked nothing like the peaceful science teacher that he knew so well. She had been transformed into a secret agent. She had become Major Steinback once more.

“You shouldn’t have come here,” whispered the woman.

“Actually, it’s your fault,” protested Odd. “Until now, we were the ones doing all the dirty work, but when the time came to finally do something fun...”

The professor threw him a frigid glare.

“This isn’t a game, Odd. We have to face the terrorists, and these guns shoot real bullets. You should have stayed at Kadic.”

The children removed their rebreathers and the rest of their equipment, only keeping on their wetsuits. Soaking wet, they entered through the metal door and slid into a tight storeroom guided by Hertz, who, as they entered, remained guarding the entrance with the gun in her hands and her eyes focused into two narrow slivers.

Inside, there were three secret agents, Ulrich’s father, Jeremy’s father and the Ishiyamas. Everyone was crammed into their wetsuits over which they had put on bulletproof vests. Lone Wolf and his two partners were armed.

“Why are the children here?” demanded Ferret.

“Yeah, what are they doing here?” added Weasel like an echo.

“Keep quiet!” Lone Wolf hushed them. “They’ll hear us!”

Akiko, Yumi’s mother, closed her hand like a vice on her daughter’s shoulder.

“You owe me an explanation for this, Yumi. And it better be good.”

Odd realised that his friend was in trouble, and he rushed to intervene.

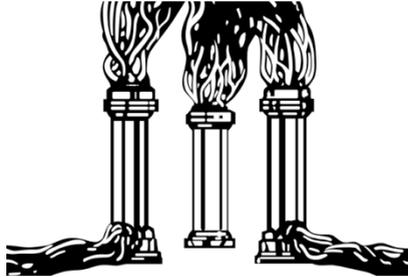
“We wanted to take part in the mission. We know how to use the scanners, so we could be of use.”

Lone Wolf furrowed his brow, perplexed, but Odd wasn’t about to let this stop them. They had managed to make it this

far, and he was more than determined to participate in this adventure.

7

X.A.N.A.'S DECISION



The Hermitage's semi-basement was made up of a long corridor to which a number of storerooms and rooms were connected. One of these was a refrigerator room that had not seen light for many years, which led to the secret room in which Hopper had built a scanner to use to enter the Mirror and the First City.

Aside from the secret passage through the sewers, the only exit from the basement was in the house's garage, from which could be accessed the living room and the large garden.

Odd, Yumi and Richard remained hidden, waiting for the adults to finish a quick exploration.

Professor Hertz returned to the basement several minutes later.

“Come with me, I’ll accompany you to the secret room. Michel has already set to work on the scanner to get your friends out. You’ll stay with him, be silent and courteous, and wait for the rest of us to take care of all the rest.”

The youngsters nodded.

The professor behind them acting as a protective shield, they left the tiny room and ran towards the refrigerator room. From one end of the corridor, Lone Wolf watched them, gun in hand.

Memory had left to bring them hot tea and was now stealing a glance at the boy with glasses through the steam from her cup.

Jeremy was thirteen, while her daughter would already be around twenty-three years old. Memory couldn’t believe it: Aelita should already be a grown woman by now. The last time she had seen her, she had been very small, and throughout all these long years, she, her mother, had forgotten her. How could she have?

Since she had awoken from being unconscious, Memory had received rapid glimpses – visions – of a past that she never seemed to have lived. She remembered a military base. She had worked there at her husband Waldo’s side. He was robust, had a beard, and...they had a daughter together. Her darling Aelita.

Then, a soldier named Mark Hollenback had kidnapped her, and, continuously on the road, had taken her from one prison to the other for many years. She had then been locked in a hidden cabin in the national park of Mercantour, in the French Alps. She had then been stranded somewhere in England, and later in Morocco.

The soldier, who had adopted the name Hannibal Mago, had forced her to work for the Green Phoenix, his criminal organisation. She had rebelled against him, because all she wanted was to find her husband and daughter again. And each time, after a while, when she thought she would never make it, her necklace would glow. It was Waldo, telling her that he was still thinking of her and always loved her. She responded to him in the same way. It was a simple and silent method of contact that had allowed her to remain hopeful for a very long time.

She remembered one scene in particular from this period of time. It was the 2nd of May 1994. Mago had forced her into a room with a chair and a camera. He had bound her hands and forced her to record a message for her husband. He wanted to force him to recommence work on Project Carthage for him, but in this message, she had pleaded for him to flee, and Mago had knocked her out to render her unconscious.

Less than a month later, something happened. Grigory Nictapolis had entered her room. For once, he wasn't accompanied by his two dogs and was wearing a strange pair

of leather gloves with a screen on the back and long, coloured cables leading from the fingers. The man had placed his hands on her head and she...she had lost her name. She had become Memory. She had lost her past, and from that moment on became Mago's assistant.

How had Grigory managed to erase her memory of the past? Who was she really? What was her name? And why is it that for more than a dozen years, the necklace had never lit up, not even once, to signal to her that Waldo and Aelita were well and still thinking of her?

Memory finished drinking her tea and placed the cup on one of the console screens.

Jeremy turned to her.

"Anthea, look..." he said.

Memory stared at him, eyes wide. That was her real name. Anthea.

The refrigerator room was a square room with an enormous airtight door. Large metal hooks hung from the ceiling, and on the walls were large, empty shelves. Several ventilation shafts embedded in the walls served to cool the room using a gigantic motor in another room. But currently, it was rather warm.

On the back wall, a brick door had slid up on invisible railings to reveal a tiny passageway that led to a lit room.

"I'm leaving you here," Professor Hertz announced, lowering the barrel of her gun. "Try not to break anything or cause any problems."

Yumi nodded. She still couldn't get her mother's look of reproach out of her head, and was beginning to think it was a mistake to come here... Odd had always been the slightly goofy jester of the group. Since when had he become a warped-plan maker? It was obvious that if there was one thing he could do, it was get them in trouble.

Richard, Odd and the young girl bade goodbye to the professor and ducked their heads to enter the secret room.

It was a small, empty space, containing only a sofa and an old television. One of the walls had a large opening in it, made by the end of a pick, through which they could see yet another room with a command post and a scanner-column inside, the latter of which looked somewhat like a shower cubicle.

Mister Belpois was already working on the computer. Yumi approached, distractedly running her fingers along the surface of the column. Once inside, she could be virtualised inside the Mirror or the First City. And she could free her friends.

"How's it going?" she asked Jeremy's father.

The man gave her a warm smile. Michel Belpois very much resembled his son. He wore the same round glasses and had the same blond hair, although his was beginning to grow sparser on the top of his head, leaving a bald patch.

“Well, I’m trying to remember how this thing works,” he explained to her. “It’s been years since I laid my hands on a terminal like this one.”

“I’m sorry,” Yumi said, returning his smile. “I’m not very good with... I mean... I’m sure that Jeremy would know what to do. Although, if you want, I could try to lend a hand.”

Michel offered up his place in front of the keyboard.

“Go on!” Odd approved, enthusiastically encouraging Yumi. “Get in contact with Aelita right away.”

It was at that moment the children heard gunfire.

X.A.N.A. was invisible.

Ulrich and Eva were in a small clearing among the trees and the artificial intelligence was floating all around them. It permeated the air, living in the tree trunks so tall their canopies were lost in the clear, monotone sky, and hidden in the immeasurable emerald green carpet of the woods. And it observed.

Its Manta Rays had taken the children to a clearing near one of the towers, an enormous candle planted in the ground by a tangle of dark roots.

Through these Lyoko towers, X.A.N.A. could interact with the real world, use its power to infiltrate the electrical network of any nation on Earth and deactivate or destroy it. Or he could even exploit its incredible energy to save the two children and bring them to safety.

They seemed so fragile to him! They were talking to each other calmly, without noticing his presence. He could have launched an army of monsters upon them and destroyed them. With a simple click of his fingers, he could have reduced their life points to nothing and sent them back to reality. But he hadn't done it.

X.A.N.A. was a very advanced program, and he couldn't feel uncertainty or confusion in the human sense of the words. X.A.N.A. compiled data, fed it into complex statistical matrixes, ran simulations and analysed the results. And at that moment, however, the creature couldn't decide how to act. All his projections advised him to maintain his alliance with the Green Phoenix. He had to help the terrorists conquer the world, destroy all the Earth's communications and overthrow its governments. At the end of this destructive procedure, it wouldn't be hard for him to get rid of Mago and become the absolute master of the world.

But this success would have a price: it meant the defeat and probably the death of Aelita and her young friends. And X.A.N.A. couldn't accept that. This simple loss, such a marginal one, stirred something within him, blocking his logical processes with something that resembled...rage.

Could this be the virus Jeremy was talking about?

Or perhaps he is no longer a simple and cold computer program?

X.A.N.A. condensed himself, uniting the matter on Lyoko to adopt a human form.

Upon seeing the black-haired boy appear before him, Ulrich leapt up and slid his hands onto the handle of his katana.

“There you are,” he exclaimed.

“If I wanted to hurt you,” commented X.A.N.A. with a smile, “I wouldn’t have chosen this fragile appearance,” he turned towards Eva. “How is my young assistant doing?”

“Well, thank you...” the girl responded unsteadily.

“Excellent. Until Jeremy and I agree on a plan of action, you shall be my guests. If you need something, you need only ask.”

At that moment, X.A.N.A. felt an incoming communication. It was coming from the factory command post, but it wasn’t Jeremy. It was Mago in person.

The boy turned to Ulrich.

“The boss of the Green Phoenix wants to speak to me. You can listen in on the conversation, but you must remain silent. He cannot know that you’re here.”

Ulrich nodded and X.A.N.A. stretched out an arm to draw a square in the air. Suddenly, a screen appeared, floating a metre above the ground. In the frame, they could see the face of Hannibal Mago.

“Pleased to see you again,” said the boss of the Green Phoenix.

He smiled, and his mouth opened, clearly displaying his golden canine teeth.

Odd jumped. At his side, Yumi and Michel Belpois stood up and the three of them turned to the entrance of the secret room. Richard, who had stayed by the side of the hole the whole time, had his back pressed against the wall and was having trouble breathing. They heard more gunfire, the sound of objects being thrown to the floor and shouting in French and other languages.

The alarm had been raised. The men of the Green Phoenix had noticed they were there.

“Richard!” Odd cried. “Run to the door of the refrigerator room and get ready to close it if you see an enemy soldier.”

“Yes...”

“Yumi, open the connection to the Mirror or the First City. Whichever. We just have to get our friends out of there.”

The girl got back to work on the computer, helped by Jeremy's father.

“We're connected to the First City,” said Michel Belpois, shaking his head, “but the scanner isn't picking up any human life forms.

Yumi's fingers trembled on the keyboard and her friend ran to her side.

“Don't worry,” he whispered. “You'll see, Ulrich and Eva will be fine. I'm sure there's a logical explanation. Meanwhile, try to get in contact with Aelita.”

“Got it,” responded the girl, hammering her fingers against the keys.

Odd stayed for a moment to observe the monitors, forcing himself to ignore the battle sounds coming from outside. He could hear the barking of dogs.

“Aha!” exclaimed Michel joyfully. “I’ve just found Aelita. We’ll have an audio-visual connection in a second.”

The screen trembled from the interference contaminating the transmission like a curtain of sparks. Then, the image cleared to show the entrance to the factory, beside an elevator leading to the underground floors.

Aelita was with a young boy with black hair. They saw her lift her head and put a hand to her ear.

“Is someone there?” she asked.

“Aelita, it’s me, Odd! How are you doing? Has X.A.N.A...”

“No, no, no. Everything’s fine. I could even say...X.A.N.A. and I have become friends.”

Odd opened his eyes wide as saucers, stupefied.

Yumi leaned towards the computer screen.

“Aelita, we don’t have much time,” she interrupted. “We can’t find Ulrich and Eva in the First City. Do you know what happened to them?”

“They’re safe and sound on Lyoko. X.A.N.A. gave them refuge,” responded the pink-haired girl.

“Ok,” Odd exclaimed. “For now, we’re going to get you out of the Mirror. Get ready!”

Aelita tried to babble a response but Odd became distracted by an uproar coming from the next room.

The Green Phoenix soldiers had made it inside.

Hannibal Mago explained to X.A.N.A. that a group of people from Kadac had infiltrated the Hermitage with the help of the men in black.

The young man observed Ulrich and Eva out of the corner of his eye. They were seated on the ground, concerned and frightened. Was saving them really so important to him?

“What do you want of me?” he asked the boss of the Green Phoenix.

“You could be a little friendlier,” Mago responded, shaking his head. “After all, we’re now associates. Anyway, here’s what I want: create more robot soldiers immediately, and make them come out of the Hermitage scanner to help my men. Meanwhile, I want to create a little chaos in the city, to give them a small taste of what’s to come. Make all the traffic lights on all the roads red, to cause a string of accidents everywhere. Cut the electrical power. Screw up the radio communications of the police, the army, the firefighters... Well, you get what I’m going for. I want Dido to know that I’m not kidding around when I tell her to stay away.”

X.A.N.A. knew that this moment would have come sooner or later. In the meantime, he had tried to buy time: he had helped Aelita and, as much as possible, Ulrich and Eva, but he had not personally exposed himself. X.A.N.A. wasn’t even a person in a strict sense. He was a digital entity that was currently divided in two. The first half, the one in Lyoko, possessed almost unlimited power and the cold clear-

sightedness of a computer, while the other, the weaker half, was still prisoner in the Mirror, and had begun to develop something new: emotions.

But now, he had to make a decision. Should he help Mago and become the most powerful digital creature in Earth's history? Or should he help the children by giving in to this strange human component that he still didn't completely understand?

In a fraction of a second, the artificial intelligence activated hundreds of simulation programs within himself and analysed the results. Remaining by the side of the terrorists would mean absolute power. And yet...

"No," he replied.

The screen showed the smile vanish from Mago's face.

"My friend, allow me to explain to you how this works. I have more than one trick up my sleeve..."

Mago opened his hand, showing his palm. On it was a small, black, plastic box with a single red button on it, covered by a transparent cover.

"All I have to do is press this button and *poof!* Supercomputer extinguished. And you'll be trapped inside once again."

X.A.N.A. shrugged. He had already made a decision and, for the first time in his "life," he felt a sense of calm, coming directly from the part of him that was listening from inside the Mirror.

“I also have some trump cards,” he responded calmly. “For example, I can use the towers on Lyoko to enter your brain. And I assure you that it is not a pleasant experience.”

From the other side of the screen, in the clearing, Eva nodded firmly.

“So we’re equal,” X.A.N.A. continued. “Both of us have a gun pointed at the other’s head. But that’s not why I don’t want to help you. I simply can’t do it.”

This was absolutely false, but X.A.N.A. now had to lie. Jeremy had asked him to pretend he was an ally of the Green Phoenix until the right moment. And, according to his statistical projections, that moment had not yet come.

“Creating robot soldiers is very tiring,” the young boy explained. “Lyoko’s energy resources are still recharging. If you don’t believe me, you can ask Jeremy. As soon as I’m ready for action again, I’ll let you know.”

The final image the screen showed before dissolving into thin air was Hannibal Mago slamming his fist on the table.

The airtight door opened on all sides and Richard was sent flying through the air, hitting the cement wall back-first.

Hertz entered the room like a whirlwind, aiming her gun at the other side of the metal door. The sound of gunfire echoed like thunder through the refrigerator room.

Richard moaned in pure fear, while the woman continued to shoot without turning around.

“Close the door!” she ordered.

These words acted on Richard like a spring. He quickly climbed up the shelves, reached the hooks hanging from the ceiling and pulled on them, moving them. He then turned to Hertz, and noticed a soldier in camouflage uniform behind her, two heads taller than her, face covered by a black balaclava and a submachine gun in his hands.

Richard wanted to yell, run towards her to help her, but his muscles were contracted and fully resisted the idea of moving. He remained rooted to the spot, watching with eyes wide open as the professor flipped her weapon in her hand and struck the soldier's jaw with the butt. He heard the cracking of broken bones, then the woman turned on one leg, hitting the man with the heel of her other leg as she corrected her grip on the gun, raising her arm and shooting another soldier approaching through the corridor.

“Richard!” she yelled.

The young man bounded towards her and helped her close off the refrigerator room, barricading the door with metal hooks they'd taken off the ceiling.

They made it just in time. An instant later, they saw the furious faces of soldiers pressing against the small, reinforced glass window. The terrorists began to push and slam against the door.

“By a hair...” the young man murmured.

He noticed Yumi stick her head out through the small door leading to the secret room and observe the professor perplexedly.

“What happened? Where are the others?” asked the girl. Hertz stuck her gun between her wetsuit and belt before shaking her head.

“They were captured. The Green Phoenix agents outnumbered us, so they were forced to surrender.”

“My parents too?” Yumi asked, voice trembling.

“I’m sorry,” the woman said, nodding.

8

ESCAPE INTO THE MIRROR



For a moment, Yumi felt the tears threaten to come. Her parents. Ulrich's father. These three funny secret agents. They had all been captured. What would they do to them? Would they assassinate them?

Professor Hertz was pressed against the metal door, looking on with worry through to the other side of the small window. Odd and Richard showed up running side by side with more hooks and helped her to completely seal the entrance of the refrigerator room.

"They won't be able to get in through here anymore," Odd declared, satisfied.

"I'm worried this will only gain us a few minutes," Hertz commented, lowering her head.

The professor hurried to tell them what had happened. She and the others had gone from the basement up to the garage where they were confronted by the first soldiers on guard, which provoked a violent shootout. The men in black moved to the living room of the Hermitage, and Yumi's parents and Walter Stern tried to reach the garden, while she stayed in rear-guard to defend the only doorway to the underground.

And this was what had saved her. From her position, she saw the others lay down their weapons, and the Green Phoenix soldiers tie them up and gag them. Her only option left was to return and re-join the kids.

Yumi was still in a state of shock. She hadn't moved. In front of her, the large door to the room shook under the blows of the terrorists on the other side.

"What do we do now?" asked Richard.

"Nothing. All that's left we can do is surrender. How are you progressing with the scanner?"

These words reawoke Yumi's sense of self-control. This wasn't the time to worry. They needed to act, and now!

"There's still another exit," the young girl murmured. "Things changed. X.A.N.A. is helping us. Odd and I can virtualise ourselves into the Mirror where he and Aelita are. Afterwards, you can destroy the scanner. Then, Mago's men won't be able to bring us back in."

"What are you talking about?!" cried Odd. "You want to abandon Richard, Jeremy's dad and the professor here?"

Hertz motioned for him to stop.

“It’s a good idea, but we need to act fast.”

The small group returned to the secret room where Michel continued to maintain his connection to Aelita. Yumi explained the situation to him in several words.

“Alright!” her friend approved from within the Mirror. “Here with me, you’ll be safe. We even found a way to join up with Eva and Ulrich on Lyoko.”

X.A.N.A. nodded from beside her.

“I will protect you from the Green Phoenix.”

“I’m sorry that you’ll have to stay here,” said Yumi while she turned to Hertz. “I promise that we’ll find a way to save you from this mess.”

“Clearly, everything has fallen back into your hands, children,” the professor responded, shrugging her shoulders.

The helicopter flew over the city. Dido checked her watch: eight minutes until one in the morning.

The journey from Washington had lasted longer than foreseen after the boss of the men in black had to make a pit stop at Brussels to drop off Maggie at the central European headquarters. It was a necessary detour in order to coordinate the operation and give out several important directives. And she had also taken advantage of the situation in order to switch her means of transportation.

The helicopter was a swift and speedy Eurocopter EC-135, as pitch black as the dark of the night surrounding it. On

board, in addition to Dido and the pilot, were five agents. All were clothed the same way, in black suits with sunglasses on despite how dark it was inside the cabin. They had shaved heads, and their faces seemed emotionless, as if they were sculpted out of granite. They were the cream of the crop. They would be useful.

Dido concentrated her attention on the city that unfolded beneath them. The roads shone with a carpet of light cut in half by the dark strip of river flowing in-between. This is where the factory was located, shining on its own in the middle of its small island, and a bit further away was the Kadic campus.

A phone started to ring. Dido searched through her small bag, took out the device and observed the screen. It was Maggie.

“Tell me everything,” she said.

“Ma’am, I have a call for you on hold... From Hannibal Mago.”

Dido let out a sigh. She hadn’t yet arrived, and problems were already cropping up.

“I’ll take the call,” she murmured.

A moment later, she heard a click and an acerbic, masculine voice.

“Welcome to Paris, my friend.”

Dido wasn’t surprised that Mago had discovered her position. This man had money and power, and in order to fly a helicopter over the city, she needed to receive a tonne of au-

thorisation. Which is why she had no choice but to ask him, in an abrupt, assertive manner, what it was he desired.

“I have several urgent updates. Some of your men, with a handful of...heheh...parents of students at Kadic attacked my location at the Hermitage tonight. My men captured them in several minutes. I already gave you a warning once, and I advise that you don't try to free them or attack the Hermitage. I've restarted work on Project Carthage.”

Dido was paralysed. Carthage, the most terrifying weapon ever created by mankind, was now in the hands of a crazy, immoral terrorist.

“I have a small project in mind,” Mago continued. “Conquering the world. After tomorrow, at midnight on the dot, I will use the supercomputer to stop all air traffic in France. I will then block all communications: radio, telephone, Internet, absolutely everything. And I will continue to do so until the government satisfies my demands.”

Dido understood that this tyrant in power wanted her to ask him what his demands were, but she didn't want to give him the satisfaction. She waited instead until the terrorist began to speak again.

“I want the Parliament to name me President with full powers. If not, I'll see to it that France is plunged into chaos. Think wisely, Dido. I could paralyse the hospitals, the police and even the army. I can reduce the nation to ashes.”

The woman felt a shiver run up her spine. She tried to reply, but before she had the chance, the phone began to emit a deep beep-beep-beep indicating the end of the call.

Michel Belpois straightened the computer.

“Odd’s there,” he announced.

Yumi approached the scanner and brushed the tips of her fingers past the luminous text that cautioned against use by adults. The door out was there, but only she and Odd could use it.

The sliding doors that closed off the column opened with a *whish*, revealing a narrow, cylindrical space that was completely empty inside. Her friend was in the Mirror.

The young girl turned towards the refrigerator room. From where she stood, she couldn’t see Hertz or Richard, but she could clearly hear the noises of muffled cries and dull bangs against the large metal door. How much longer could they resist? What would happen to them next?

Jeremy’s father gave her a timid smile.

“Don’t worry about us,” he whispered to her. “As soon as you’re virtualised into the Mirror, I will destroy the logical components of the scanner and any other fundamental pieces as well. After all, it was me who built this machine. Afterwards, we’ll surrender, let the terrorists enter, and give ourselves to them hands up. They won’t hurt us, you’ll see.”

“That’s what I hope...” Yumi replied to him.

Mister Belpois took her hand.

“You heard Aelita. My son, Jeremy, is well, just like your friends, Ulrich and Eva. That’s all that counts.”

They heard a loud crash arise from the cold room, the noise of a wall on the verge of being bust down.

“The door’s about to give way!” Yumi heard Richard’s voice.

The young girl looked decidedly at Michel Belpois and raised her hand to give a farewell. Then, she entered the column, and it closed behind her.

“Ready for virtualisation!” exclaimed the man, his voice resonating from the speakers of the scanner. “Three... Two... One...”

Yumi closed her eyes and felt an invisible energy lift her into the air until her feet separated from the floor. A strong wind ruffled her dark black hair, then the young girl felt the sense of tingling once more throughout her body.

It only lasted an instant. After that, Yumi’s feet fell back to the ground.

Everything around her had changed. She found herself in a narrow street between several houses. Above her head, the sky was still dark, meaning that it was early in the morning.

Odd looked at her with a smile on his face. The boy was no longer wearing his wetsuit. In its place, he had on a pair of purple overalls that were tight against his body, with a long tail, and his hands were covered with gloves with sharp claws. On his face appeared the usual lilac stripes befitting of his cat-boy avatar.

Yumi could also sense that she had transformed. She was wearing a kimono that was tight around the waist and Japanese sandals. Her hair was held back in a complicated hairstyle supported by chopsticks, and she felt the soothing weight of her warrior fans that she kept at her back.

“I’m having a bit of déjà-vu,” she commented.

Only a few days had passed since she and Odd had been virtualised for the first time into the Mirror in this exact spot. Yumi knew that they would come across a tired-looking man leafing through a newspaper while leaving the street. He had a copy of *The Investigator* dated 1 June 1994.

“What do we do?” he asked his friend, cheerful as usual.

Yumi shrugged her shoulders, slightly offended. They had just abandoned their parents, their science teacher, Richard and Michel Belpois as well as the three secret agents. How could he be so peaceful in a time like this?

“Hurry up,” responded the young girl. “We need to make it to the bar where Hertz is talking with Dido. The Mirror command box materialises there, and then...”

“That won’t be needed,” Aelita interrupted her.

The young girl ran to hug her friends. X.A.N.A. handed them a pair of blue, plastic boxes.

“We thought that it’d be best to speed things up,” he explained to them. “Here.”

The soldiers stormed into the refrigerator room upon demolishing the door.

“I surrender!” yelled Richard. “We surrender! Don’t hurt us!”

Professor Hertz left her weapon on the ground and observed the soldiers in total calmness. To her side, Michel Belpois seemed a bit worried, and his hands were stained with grease. Taking apart and destroying the key pieces of the scanner had proved more complicated than he had foreseen.

The first to enter the refrigerator room was Grigory Nictapolus. His thin face was marred by fatigue and rage. He shoved Richard aside so hard that it propelled him into the wall and approached Hertz next with a defiant air.

“Where are the kids?” he asked. “I know very well they came here too.”

Hertz didn’t budge, and Richard admired the woman’s composure.

“They escaped,” she responded. “To a place where you couldn’t capture them.”

Grigory leaned over to look into the secret room and gave a sarcastic smirk.

“How great. You sent them to Lyoko, huh? Perfect. In that case, we can go look for them whenever we want.”

As the man spoke, Richard could clearly see his icy eyes. They seemed like those of a shark, a merciless predator.

DANGER
ACCÈS
INTERDIT

⚠ WARNING
DO NOT ENTER
PUMP ROOM
Without
Authorization

⚠ ATTENTION



NE PAS ENTRER
sans autorisation

Report no. 176/bis,
found in Jeremy
Belpois's room

6 JUNE 1994:
AELITA'S LAST DAY
ON EARTH...

2 JUNE 1994:
ANOTHER MIRROR DAY
TO EXPLORE

All the teams in
action must
synchronise on
the protected
frequency

DOES HANNIBAL
MAGO HAVE AERIAL
TRANSPORT AT HIS
DISPOSAL?
DANGER!

Time:
00:30 GMT +1

Secret mission
black Raven.



International Morse Code

Aborable
mission

A	•••••	1	•
B	•••••	2	••
C	•••••	3	•••
D	•••••	4	••••
E	•••••	5	•••••
F	•••••	6	•••••
G	•••••	7	•••••
H	•••••	8	•••••
I	•••••	9	•••••
J	•••••	0	•••••
K	•••••		
L	•••••		
M	•••••		
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Aerial attack,
ETA 0000 GMT +1.
Beware of turbulent winds.
Co-ordinate with ground and
water teams.
Aut no. 00465547347799
Absolute priority.

STANDARD AERIAL
EQUIPMENT

Possible counter-
attack from the
Green Phoenix.
Caution!

SATELLITE
TRANSMISSION
FROM LONE
WOLF

DIRECT
COMMUNICATION
FROM DIDO
WITH
BLACK RAVEN

All the teams in action must
synchronise on the protected
frequency

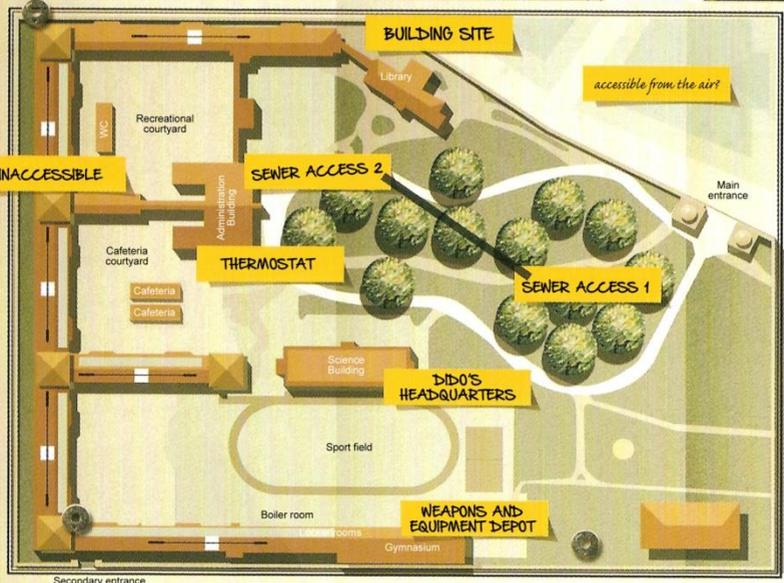
LOJOKO IS CONTROLLED
FROM HERE

ACCESS
TO THE ELEVATOR

SUPERCOMPUTER
COMMAND CONSOLE

SECRET
LABORATORY

FORBIDDEN



SCHOOL MAP

- Dirt path
- Cement path
- Sport field
- Grass
- Park
- Buildings
- Archways
- Long Staircases
- Classrooms on 1st
- Dorm rooms on 2nd
- Atlic on 3rd
- Tunnel Entrance
- Tunnel

Secondary entrance

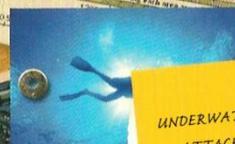
FIRST AID



CLIMBING MISSION



UNDERWATER ATTACK



AQUATIC COUNTER-ATTACK? UNDERWATER MINES?

EQUIPMENT TESTED AND VERIFIED

THE FROMMEN WILL USE CLOSED-CIRCUIT RESPIRATORS

ROOM 1
ROL ROOM

ROOM 2

Keep an eye on impulsive unpredictable

Watch carefully

Impenetrable

Hopper's daughter. Key to the mystery. Find her mother.

Complicated relationship between him and Walter.

Researched by the FBI. Contact Dida.



First name Yumi
Last name Ishiyama
Family involved Takeho, Akiko Ishiyama
Residence Parents' house, Paris
Peculiar aspect Remarkable intelligence
Appearance on Lyoko Geisha
X.A.N.A. creature Silver fox



Powers
Metal boomerang-fans.
Acrobat.



Aelita
Hopper

Hopper's daughter. Key to the mystery. Find her mother.



First name Ulrich
Last name Stern
Family involved Walter Stern (reinstated agent)
Residence Kadie dormitory
Peculiar aspect Expert in martial arts
Appearance on Lyoko Samurai
X.A.N.A. creature Manta Ray



Powers
Katana. Martial arts.
Supersprint, strength.

First name Jeremy

Last name Belpois
Family involved Michel Belpois
Residence Kadie dormitory
Peculiar aspect Computer genius
Appearance on Lyoko Unknown
X.A.N.A. creature Unknown



Powers
Knows how to program the supercomputer and control the group from the console.

Last name Skinner
Family involved Unknown
Residence United States?
Peculiar aspect Past unknown
Appearance on Lyoko Ceb Digital rooker
X.A.N.A. creature Electric guitar



Powers
"Music power"???

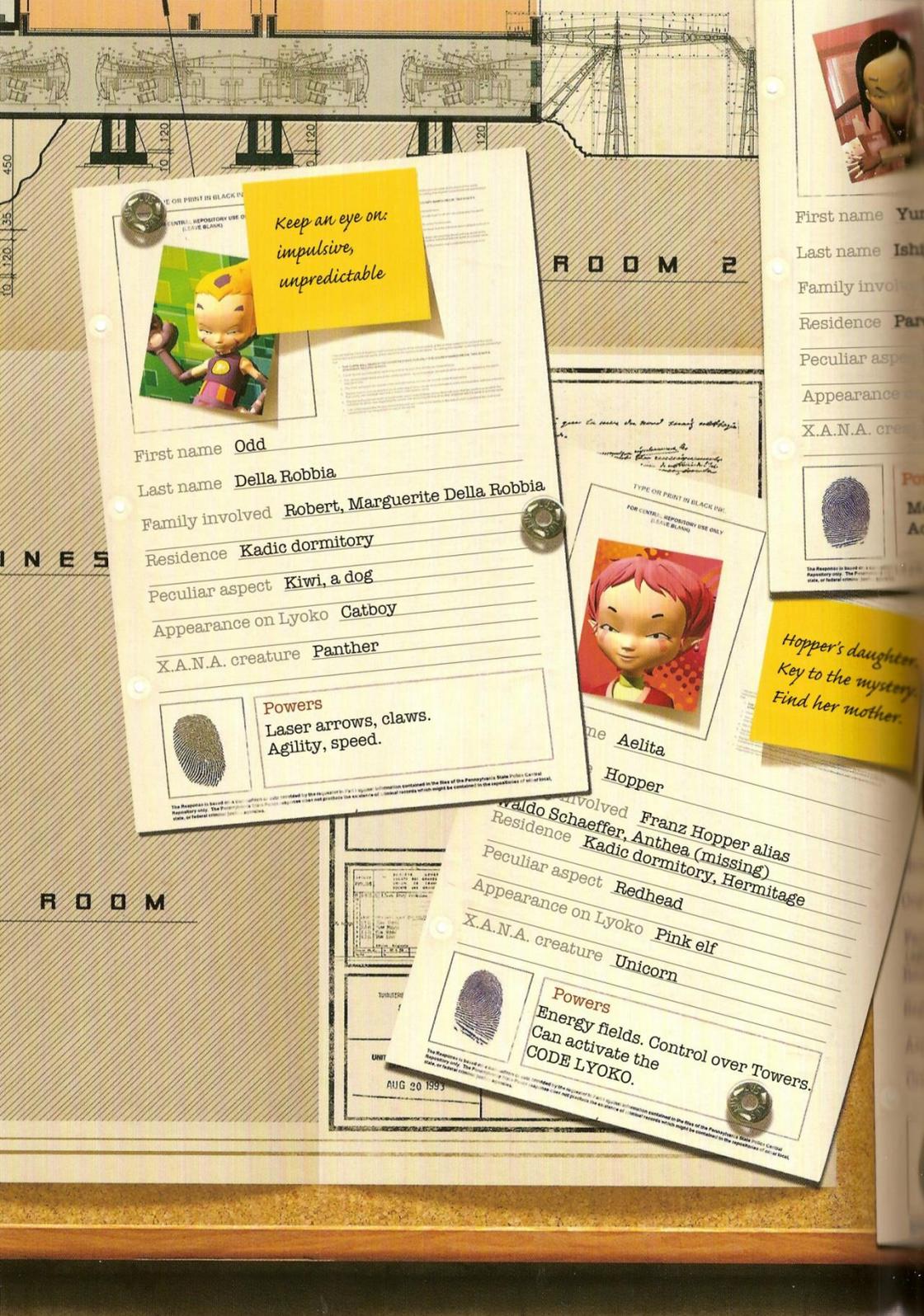
Involved Franz Hopper alias
Residence Kadie dormitory. Hermitage
Peculiar aspect Redhead
Appearance on Lyoko Pink elf
X.A.N.A. creature Unicorn



Powers
Energy fields. Control over Towers.
Can activate the CODE LYOKO.

Odd Della Robbia
Family involved Robert, Marguerite Della Robbia
Kadie dormitory
Peculiar aspect Kiwi, a dog
Appearance on Lyoko Catboy
X.A.N.A. creature Panther

Powers
Laser arrows, claws.
Agility, speed.



First name Y
 Last name Isla
 Family invol
 Residence Par
 Peculiar asp
 Appearance
 X.A.N.A. crea



The Print is based on a...
 Repository only. The Print is...
 state of Federal...
 No...
 M...
 A...

*Hopper's daughter
 Key to the mystery
 Find her mother.*

TYPE OR PRINT IN BLACK INK
 FOR CENTRAL, REPOSITORY USE ONLY
 (LEAVE BLANK)



*Keep an eye on:
 impulsive,
 unpredictable*

First name Odd
 Last name Della Robbia
 Family involved Robert, Marguerite Della Robbia
 Residence Kadic dormitory
 Peculiar aspect Kiwi, a dog
 Appearance on Lyoko Catboy
 X.A.N.A. creature Panther



Powers
 Laser arrows, claws.
 Agility, speed.

The Print is based on a...
 Repository only. The Print is...
 state of Federal...
 No...
 M...
 A...

TYPE OR PRINT IN BLACK INK
 FOR CENTRAL, REPOSITORY USE ONLY
 (LEAVE BLANK)



Aelita
Hopper

Involved Franz Hopper alias
 Residence Waldo Schaeffer, Anthea (missing)
 Peculiar aspect Kadic dormitory, Hermitage
 Appearance on Lyoko Redhead
 X.A.N.A. creature Pink elf
Unicorn



Powers
 Energy fields. Control over Towers.
 Can activate the
CODE LYOKO.

The Print is based on a...
 Repository only. The Print is...
 state of Federal...
 No...
 M...
 A...

ROOM

AUG 20 1993

THE
WILL USE CLOSED
RESPIRATORS

shiyama
house, Paris
kable intelligence
ver fox

boomerang-fans.

In penetrable.



Complicated
relationship
between him
and Walter?

Walter Stern (reinstated agent)

Kadic dormitory
pect Martial arts expert
on Lyoko Samurai
eature Manta Ray

Powers
Katana. Martial arts.
Supersprint, strength.

TYPE OR PRINT IN BLACK INK.

FOR CENTRAL REPOSITORY USE ONLY
(DO NOT BLANK)

Watch carefully.

First name Jeremy

Last name Belpois

Family involved Michel Belpois

Residence Kadic dormitory

Peculiar aspect Computer genius

Appearance on Lyoko Unknown

X.A.N.A. creature Unknown

Powers
Knows how to program the
supercomputer and control the
group from the console.

The Repository is based on a 400-offering case provided by the requester in Part 1. Further information contained in the file of the Pennsylvania State Police - Central Repository only. The Pennsylvania State Police may use cover not practice (in an absence of criminal records which might be contained) in the reproduction of all or part of this file.



Researched by
the FBI.
Contact Dido.

First name Eva

Last name Skinner

Family involved None

Residence United States?

Peculiar aspect Past unknown

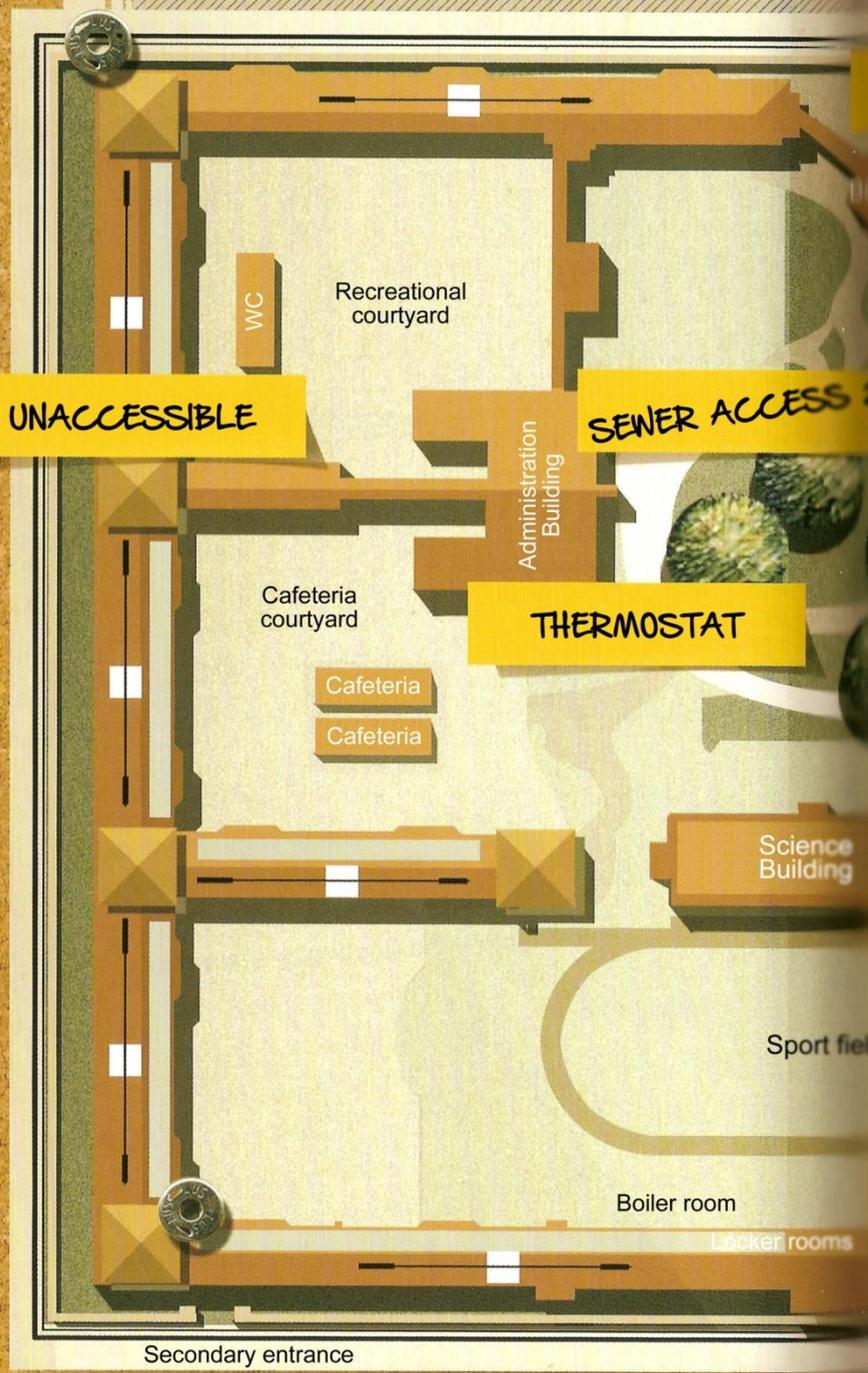
Appearance on Lyoko Ceb Digital rocker

X.A.N.A. creature Electric guitar

Powers
"Music power"???

The Repository is based on a 400-offering case provided by the requester in Part 1. Further information contained in the file of the Pennsylvania State Police - Central Repository only. The Pennsylvania State Police may use cover not practice (in an absence of criminal records which might be contained) in the reproduction of all or part of this file.





UNACCESSIBLE

SEWER ACCESS

THERMOSTAT

Secondary entrance

LDING SITE

accessible from the air?

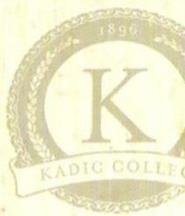
Main entrance

PARK

SEWER ACCESS 1

DIDO'S
QUARTERS

WEAPONS AND
EQUIPMENT DEPOT



SCHOOL M

-  Dirt path
-  Cement path
-  Sport field
-  Grass
-  Park
-  Buildings
-  Archways
-  Long staircase

Classrooms
Dorm rooms
Attic on 3rd

Tunnel entrance

Tunnel



6 JUNE 1994:
AELITA'S LAST DAY
ON EARTH...

Report no. 176/bis,
found in Jeremy
Belpois's room



DOES HANNIBAL
MAGO HAVE AERIAL
TRANSPORT AT HIS
DISPOSAL?
DANGER!

Time:
00:30 GMT+1



Secret mission
Black Raven

AER

8/1	8/2	8/3	8/4	8/5	8/6	8/7	8/8	8/9
8/10	8/11	8/12	8/13	8/14	8/15	8/16	8/17	8/18
8/19	8/20	8/21	8/22	8/23	8/24	8/25	8/26	8/27
8/28	8/29	8/30	8/31	8/32	8/33	8/34	8/35	8/36

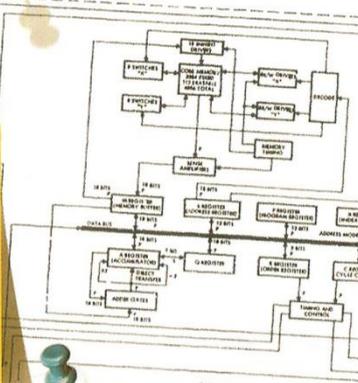
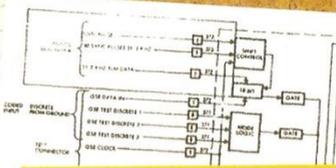


STANDARD AERIAL
EQUIPMENT

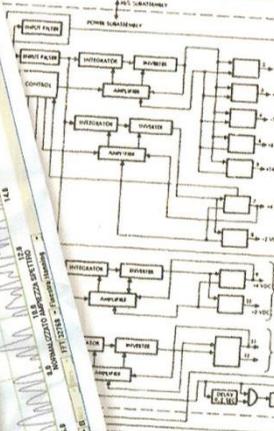
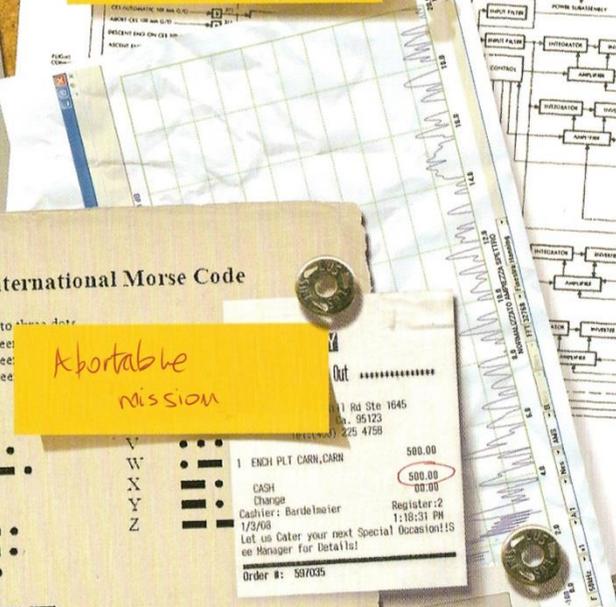
Aerial attack,
ETA 00h00 GMT +1.
Beware of turbulent
Co-ordinate with ground
water teams.
Aut no. 00465547347799
Absolute priority.

Possible counter-
attack from the
Green Phoenix.
Caution!

JUNE 1994:
 ANOTHER MIRROR DAY
 TO EXPLORE



All the teams in action must synchronise on the protected frequency



International Morse Code

1. A dash is equal to three dots
 2. The space between the space between

Abortable mission

1 ENCH PLT CARR, CARR 500.00
 CASH 00.00
 Charge Register: 2
 Cashier: Bardelester 1:18:31 PM
 Let us Cater your next Special Occasion!!
 on Manager for Details!
 Order #: 5970025

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T
 W X Y Z
 1 2 3 4 5 6

SATELLITE TRANSMISSION FROM LONE WOLF

DIRECT COMMUNICATION FROM DDO WITH BLACK RAVEN

All the teams in action must synchronise on the protected frequency

LYOKO IS CONTROLLED FROM HERE

ACCESS TO THE ELEVATOR

CLIMBING MISSION

120°43.000' W

120°42

Prepared by:
www.WenatcheeOutdoors.org



Dome - 6.0
Forestland
Boulder - 5.95
IC Enc
5.95



© 2008 National Geographic

120°44.000' W

0.0
0.0
0.5

120°43.000' W

Note: Mileage numbers following each area

Blue Line
Red Dash
Yellow Dashes
Red Triangles
Red Diamonds: Boulders



UNDERWA

Map created with **TOPOLIO** ©2008 National Geographic

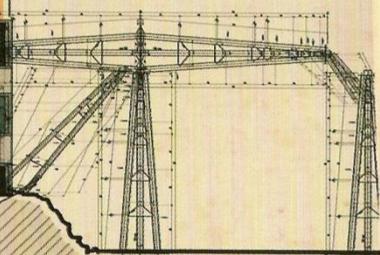
120°44.000' W

0.0
0.0

ROOM 1

COL ROOM

**AQUATIC
COUNTER-ATTACK?
UNDERWATER
MINES?**



ROOM 2

TYPE OR PRINT IN BLACK INK.

FOR CENTRAL REPOSITORY USE ONLY
(LEAVE BLANK)

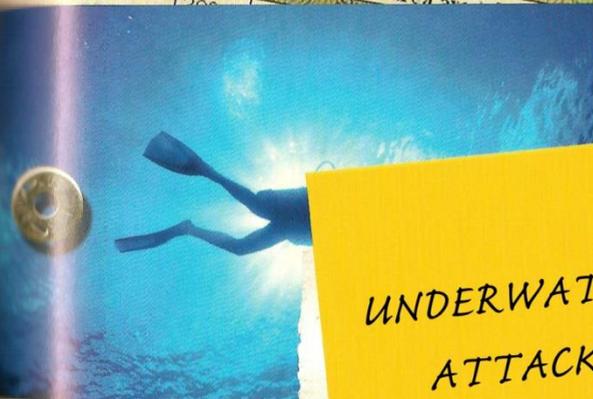
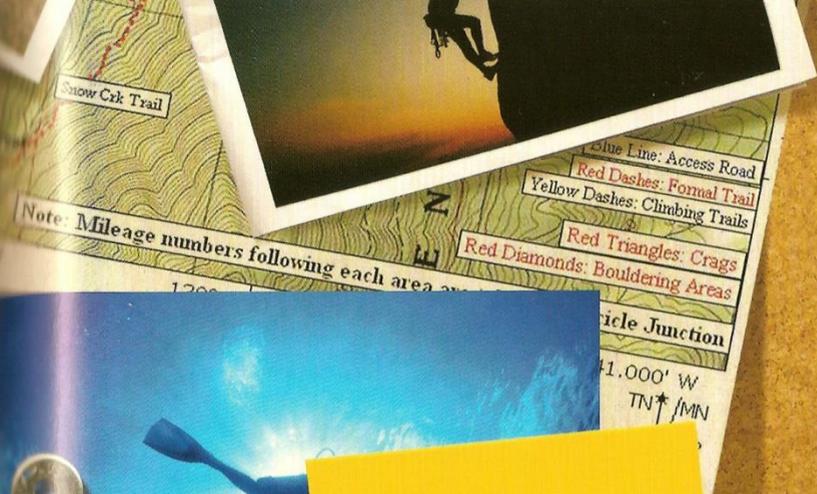


First name Yumi

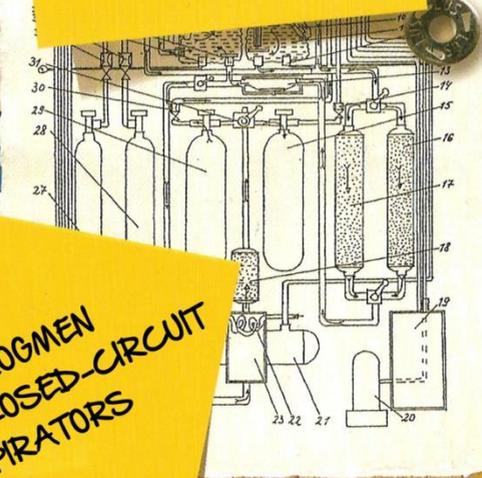
Last name Ishiyama

Full name Takaho Akiko Ishiyama





UNDERWATER
ATTACK



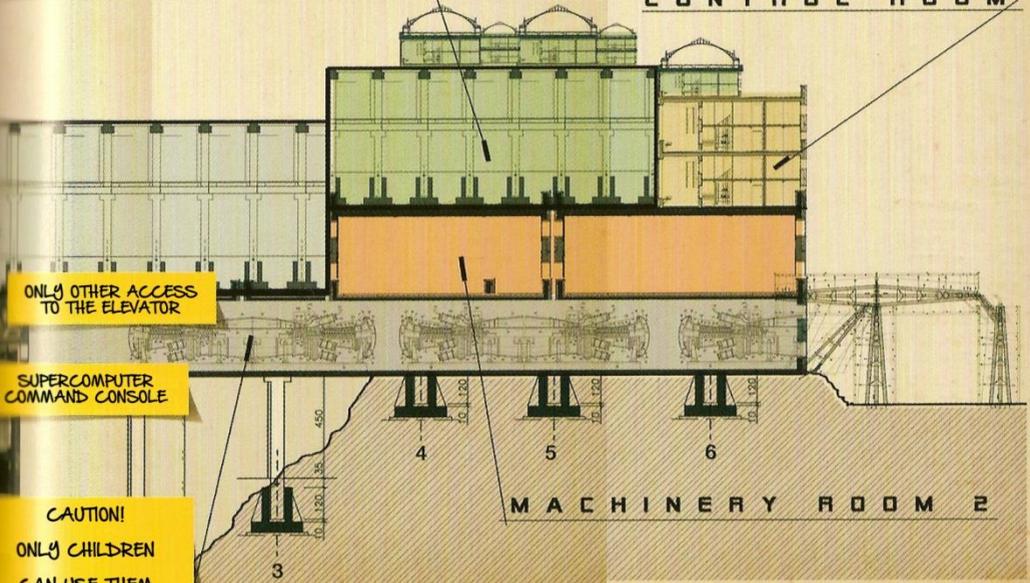
THE FROGMEN
WILL USE CLOSED-CIRCUIT
RESPIRATORS



MACHINERY ROOM 1

PERAL HALL

CONTROL ROOM



ONLY OTHER ACCESS TO THE ELEVATOR

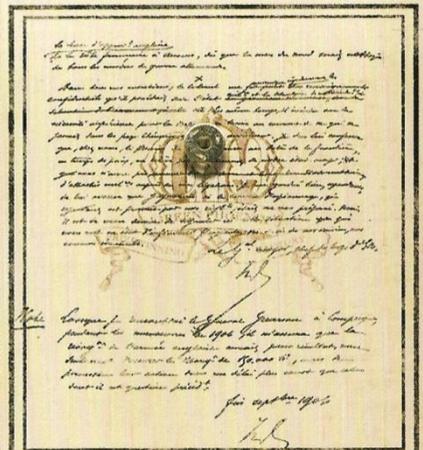
SUPERCOMPUTER COMMAND CONSOLE

CAUTION!
ONLY CHILDREN CAN USE THEM

WHAT IS THE CODE DOWN?

TURBINES ROOM

MACHINERY ROOM 2



<p>SEARCHED INDEXED</p> <p>SERIALIZED FILED</p> <p>FBI - NEW YORK</p> <p>APR 11 1993</p>		<p>A04</p>
<p>SEARCHED INDEXED</p> <p>SERIALIZED FILED</p> <p>FBI - NEW YORK</p> <p>APR 11 1993</p>		

<p>SEARCHED INDEXED</p> <p>SERIALIZED FILED</p> <p>FBI - NEW YORK</p> <p>APR 11 1993</p>	<p>X-Y</p> <p>154</p>	<p>BY THE COURT</p> <p><i>John P. [Signature]</i></p> <p>CLERK OF COURT</p>
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DANGER
• ACCES
INTERDIT

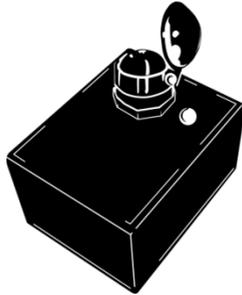
⚠ WARNING
DO NOT ENTER
PUMP ROOM
Without
Authorization

⚠ ATTENTION
NE PAS ENTRER
sans autorisation



9

THE BREACH TO LYOKO



Jeremy felt dead beat. He couldn't even remember when he'd last slept, and, after another night in front of the computer, he felt like his eyes were about to burst. For an instant his thoughts turned back to his mother, who had always told him not to spend too much time playing video games, because it isn't good for his health. He gave a hint of a smile: his mother had been right. But right now, he wasn't playing. This was very serious business.

Memory and the boy exited the elevator on the ground floor of the factory. Jeremy blinked several times, realising that daytime had arrived hours ago. Through the large windows came a grey and milky light. There were dust motes

floating and spinning in the air from where they stood to the emerald green, nomadic tent.

A noise caught his attention and Jeremy turned his head in the direction of the new platforms that joined the lower floor with the entrance, which was higher up at the end of the bridge.

The child thought he was dreaming for a moment. Maybe it was a hallucination due to fatigue... But no, he wasn't hallucinating.

Grigory Nictapulus was at the head of the procession, followed by Professor Hertz, who was walking as stiffly as a plank of wood, hands tied behind her back and dressed in a grotesque, form-fitting wetsuit. Behind her were the Ishiyamas, then Richard. And a little further behind... No, it was impossible... His father. And three square-jawed men who looked very lightheaded. They had been caught!

"DAD!" cried Jeremy.

He saw him look down with a surprised expression that was immediately replaced with a sad smile. Jeremy noticed that someone had given him a black eye.

Grigory began to laugh. The boy struggled greatly to not respond to the provocation. If he did, he would pay dearly in one way or another.

"Memory, are you there?" a voice came from the inside of the green tent. "Enter, and bring that pretentious boy with you."

"Let's go," whispered the woman into Jeremy's ear.

The tent was luxurious, decorated as if it were made from Persian rugs with gold thread woven into them, and soft cushions decorated with complex embroidery.

Hannibal Mago chewed on a bunch of grapes. He had changed his clothes. He was now wearing a striped canary yellow suit with a hat, vest and cravat in the same colour. Even his silk socks were yellow.

The man noticed Jeremy's surprise.

"I'm wearing yellow because I'm in a good mood. Today is a very important day for the Green Phoenix."

He searched through the interior pocket of his vest and took out a small, black plastic box. It had a single button covered by a small, transparent cover. Mago fiddled with the object with his ring-covered fingers.

"Well," he exclaimed. "You see this little detonator? In Lyoko, X.A.N.A.'s powers are almost unlimited. He can even take control of my mind. What's more, he's already threatened to do so. But this little box puts he and I on equal footing. If I press this button, I will extinguish the supercomputer, and that will allow me to eliminate X.A.N.A. if he chooses to oppose my plans."

Jeremy's heart began to beat at a thousand miles an hour. If Mago was capable of forcing X.A.N.A. to help him, he and his friends would have no chance of getting out of it.

"From now on," the man continued, "I'm forbidding you from going down to the underground floors of the factory un-

til further notice. I have other plans in mind for the super-computer.”

“What must we do, Sir?” Memory asked.

“I’ve already prepared a station and equipment for you. It’s in the director’s office of this shed. From this moment forward, the two of you will work on decrypting the computer codes full-time. They could contain a weapon. And in that case, I want it to belong to me!”

In the Mirror, Aelita and Yumi were sitting on the floor in front of the extinguished supercomputer terminal. Odd was crouching on the spinning chair and the three held blue command boxes in their hands. At their sides, X.A.N.A. levitated about ten centimetres above the floor, legs crossed and looking like a serene, concentrating Hindu monk in his yoga position. Above his head floated a sphere of light that illuminated the nearby surrounding parts of the room, the rest of which was as dark as the mouth of a wolf.

Aelita observed her friends one by one. She was so happy that they were with her, and felt that she didn’t have time to lose. Odd and Yumi had told her the latest news. The situation was moving towards a very critical point.

“Ulrich and Eva are safe,” X.A.N.A. said. “If you want, I can establish a connection bridge with them, so you can talk.”

Aelita noticed Yumi’s eyes brighten with enthusiasm and so she decided to suggest a more important plan of action.

“Wait,” she said. “The first thing we need to do is decide how to attack the terrorists. We need Jeremy.”

Yumi frowned. Aelita knew that she had been waiting to talk to Ulrich.

“Of course!” Odd, on the other hand, approved enthusiastically. “We need to take them by surprise, attack them, destroy them, and chase them out of Paris for good!”

“Ok, ok, hero,” Yumi replied. “But what do you intend to do?”

“Hm...well... I’m not sure. That’s why we need to call Jeremy!”

X.A.N.A. explained to them that he had tried to contact the boy through his other half, the one in Lyoko, but that he hadn’t succeeded. Mago in person was now the person working at the supercomputer command post.

“So, what will our next move be?” asked Odd.

“Get out of here,” Aelita decided after a moment’s thought. “I’m sick of being stuck in the Mirror.”

“The only way to escape this place,” X.A.N.A. explained, “is to create a portal that links the Lyoko of the past to the one of the present. I haven’t yet succeeded, because there’s one small problem: in the Mirror, Lyoko only exists when this factory’s supercomputer is up and running... That’s why I’m going to need all of your help at the same time. And we need to be extremely co-ordinated! You’re going to need to use your command boxes to turn the supercomputer on and work the command post. This way, Aelita and I will use the scan-

ners to enter the Lyoko of 1994. Once there, we'll go into one of the towers, and from there, we can create an access."

"But if we do it like that, Yumi and I will be stuck here!" Odd protested.

"I have a better idea in mind," X.A.N.A. replied with a smile. "With my powers and Aelita's help, I can create a bridge from the Lyoko inside the Mirror to this part of the Mirror, and through it we can pass through to the real Lyoko, the one from your present."

"If you say so..." commented Odd with a raised eyebrow and suspicious tone. "But all that's just gobbledygook to me, man. You aren't really making a mess of...?"

"And you?" Aelita asked X.A.N.A., drawing the topic away from Odd's paranoia. She had her own doubts. "In the Lyoko of the present, there's already a X.A.N.A., so what will happen to you? Will you disappear?"

"I'll simply fuse with the other part of myself and become a single entity again. The X.A.N.A. that currently lives in Lyoko is much more powerful than I, but he's missing something: his human part, in other words, me."

Odd and Yumi looked at him in stupor.

"I believe that Aelita," X.A.N.A. added after a deep breath, "has awoken something in me that I didn't even think I had. It's not easy for me to explain, but I'm convinced that the emotions I'm feeling exterminated the castle's virus. If I'm the antidote, when I unite with X.A.N.A.'s central core, I can also heal that part of me."

The boy stopped speaking. He couldn't explain what he was thinking, and that had never happened to him before. This time he'd spent imprisoned in the Mirror with Aelita had changed him. He had discovered emotions he had never before experienced: friendship, longing to help someone, courage...and even fear. Hannibal Mago could turn the super-computer off at any moment, and he didn't want to be deactivated. He was risking everything to help these children.

"I think I understand what you're trying to say," Aelita said, smiling. "The part of you in Lyoko isn't yet complete, because he's missing a fundamental piece: humanity. X.A.N.A.'s humanity – you – who is now here with us, in the Mirror, and is saving us. That's why, when you reunite with your other half...you'll become a complete human being. You may not have a body in flesh and blood like ours, but that doesn't mean much. Inside, you will be human."

Aelita stood and approached the young man, who was still floating in the air, and took his hand. Yumi smiled and copied her friend. Odd regarded X.A.N.A., somewhat surprised.

"Bah, why not?" he said finally. "Here's my hand!"

The four children were now side-by-side, hand-in-hand. X.A.N.A. felt the warmth of human skin as well as a different, more intense warmth. A form of mysterious energy that grew within him, bringing him a sense of peace.

Hannibal Mago was a very dangerous man, but they were children and they were together. They could succeed.

X.A.N.A. smiled.

Although he couldn't know it, that was his first human smile.

Dido's helicopter had brought blankets, fuel for the generators and other products of utmost importance.

With these provisions and the crates of equipment Lone Wolf had already brought, the situation at Kadic grew more normal again. The students had returned to their rooms and Principal Delmas had given the order for classes to start back up again. The men in black were now patrolling the park to ensure the Green Phoenix didn't play any tricks on them.

Dido herself had set up in the science laboratory. There were computers, an ADSL Internet connection and everything she'd need to contact headquarters in Brussels and manage her men's operations.

Mago's threat weighed on her head like the Sword of Damocles. Dido had known this man for a long time and she knew that he was capable of going through with his plan. But she also knew that he wouldn't be happy with conquering just one nation. Other countries would meet the same fate as France, until Mago succeeded in forcing all the world's governments to bend to his will.

The woman momentarily concentrated on the warm light that filtered through the laboratory windows. It really didn't seem like winter. It was much warmer in Paris than in Wash-

ington. Dido hadn't visited this place in years, and she would have liked to wander around the streets in the city centre, drink an exquisite hot chocolate in one of the charming bistros, the typical small cafés here, and maybe later go to a museum. What a shame she didn't have the time. If she didn't find a solution fast, nobody would be drinking hot chocolate for quite a while.

Somebody knocked at the door.

"Come in," Dido said, taking off the headphones and microphone that she used for videoconferences.

It was the principal. Mister Delmas was a short, plump man with grey hair, a well-kept beard and small, square-shaped glasses. Dido immediately remarked that he appeared to be intimidated.

The woman tried to give him an encouraging smile.

"Can I do something for you?"

"Actually, yes," the man responded. "I wanted to know how things are going... If you had...some kind of plan."

Dido felt the expression on her face harden. She knew that this conversation would come sooner or later, but she would have been happy to delay it further. She was about to give the principal a fistful of bad news.

"I spent the whole morning talking to representatives from the French government, the army and even the UN, and they all agreed on one thing: we can't give the terrorists what they want."

Dido breathed deeply. Principal Delmas was standing beside her, his back slightly hunched.

This is the part where the complicated business comes in.

“Mago is a madman, and to him, conquering France will only be the start of it. If we accept his conditions, the Green Phoenix will plunge the entire planet into absolute chaos. We can’t allow this to happen. The government has charged me with the difficult task of talking with him again and trying to convince him to negotiate. If he doesn’t accept my proposition...”

“What will happen then?” asked Delmas in a soft voice.

“We’ll need to stop him from fulfilling his threats, and as such we’ll be forced to attack before midday tomorrow. My agents are already set to begin. We’ll use every last resort to conquer the factory. We’ll do as much as we can to succeed and avoid having to turn to our alternative...”

“What alternative?”

Dido let out a sigh.

“Our reserve plan, in case our first attempt fails. We’re thinking about an aerial attack to bombard the factory. This way, Professor Hopper’s invention will be destroyed and we will be safe.”

“But you can’t do that!” the principal exclaimed. “Professor Hertz and the rest of the parents could be in the factory! And maybe even my students!”

“Believe me: unfortunately, I know that all too well. But we have no other choice,” Dido responded. “However, I guar-

antee that we're going to do everything in our power to get them to a safe place first."

They split up. Odd went down to the bottom floor of the factory to lower the lever that started the supercomputer. Yumi remained on the first floor to control the command post. X.A.N.A. and Aelita both went to the second floor, where the scanner-columns were located.

These three columns, placed in the centre of the room like points on a triangle, seemed like rigid, upside-down metal trees rooted to the ceiling by an inextricable system of cables and tubes. The room was submerged in darkness, but X.A.N.A. brightened it with the small sphere of light, which now floated above the palm of his hand.

Deep down, Aelita felt that everything would be fine. They were reunited once again and they would soon be with the others on Lyoko. In reality, they were still missing Jeremy, but the boy would surely find a way to give them a hand from the factory.

The lights on the second floor suddenly turned on, making the walls shine with a delicate tone of colour somewhere between yellow and orange. Aelita heard Yumi's voice, coming from the speakers hidden in the ceiling.

"Odd did it!" she exclaimed. "The instruments on the terminal are working. Now I can virtualise you onto the Lyoko of 1994, so...get ready! Sorry if I'm a bit slow at this, it's not

easy to use the computer while I'm holding a box in my hand!"

Aelita and X.A.N.A. laughed before heading to the two nearest columns.

"See you on the other side," whispered Aelita as she entered the blinding light that shone from inside the column.

The transformation was very different compared to what she remembered. She felt no wind coming from the floor of the scanner, nor the familiar tingling sensation. She simply blinked twice and found herself on Lyoko.

She was in the ice sector, which was covered in a thick blanket of very white snow. Above her head, there was a navy blue sky so dark it almost looked black. An instant later, X.A.N.A. appeared beside her.

"Curious," murmured the young man. "The Mirror's passage to Lyoko is different to what I'd imagined."

"The Mirror," Aelita began, nodding pensively, "is based on my father's memories, and he hadn't the slightest idea what virtualisation really felt like."

The girl held a hand out in front of her. Far off on the horizon, they could see a white tower sticking out of the middle of the snowy desert like a finger pointing towards the sky.

"We need to get over there, correct?" she said. "So, in that case, let's get a move on."

10

X.A.N.A.'S REBIRTH



The director's office was a small room that stank of dust and was taken over by a large, dark wooden desk and a metal filing cabinet.

Mago's men had placed two powerful computers on the table, capable of connecting to the command post and accessing the code on Richard's palm-computer.

Jeremy looked all around him.

On the other side of the door were two soldiers standing guard, but he and Memory were alone in the room. After all, she was Mago's assistant, which surely gave her a certain amount of independence.

Without making himself noticed, the young boy inspected the content of the first drawer of the desk. He found a stapler

and a pen from which he removed the plastic cap and, while Memory had her back to him, used to remove the screws as quickly as possible from the metal tower of the computer.

As soon as he finished the operation, a wide smile appeared on his face. Mago's technicians had been ordered to prevent Jeremy from connecting to the Internet, but instead of removing the wireless card, they'd simply disconnected the cables.

The boy put the wires back in place in several seconds and closed the central processing unit once more. He could succeed. If the factory had a Wi-Fi connection to the Internet, he could now localise it, hack the passcode and finally enter in contact with Kadic.

Jeremy was about to get to work with the keyboard when Memory interrupted him with a hand gesture. The woman took a small artefact out from her pocket that resembled a tennis ball. She held it with two fingers, and from the centre of the ball appeared a red antenna.

"Mago's surely set up microphones in this room, but my little machine will interfere with them long enough for us to talk in peace," she said.

Faced with a perplexed Jeremy, she continued to speak, "Last night, you called me by a new name: Anthea."

"That's not a new name," the boy murmured. "It's your real name."

"I know. And do you also know my husband? And my daughter?"

“Your daughter is named Aelita,” said Jeremy, looking her intensely in the eyes. “And your husband is Waldo Schaeffer. In other words, Professor Hopper.”

Memory brought her hands to her mouth.

“Hopper? The same Hopper who invented the supercomputer?”

Jeremy saw the woman’s eyes fill with tears. He smiled, approached her and began to tell her everything.

Lyoko was a fake world. The air hadn’t the faintest of scents, and there wasn’t even the slightest of a breeze. The snow didn’t crunch under the sole of Aelita’s elven shoes and ice was everywhere, even though it wasn’t cold. The sky was a uniform navy blue.

Aelita knew that for the rest of the kids, this strange world was difficult to bear. It made them nauseous and gave them vertigo, and they had trouble adapting to its ambiance. But it was different for her. In a sense, she was like X.A.N.A., a creature of Lyoko.

The tower was glowing in front of them. It was about ten metres high, and its surface was opaque and smooth like alabaster. Aelita ran as fast as she could with X.A.N.A. by her side.

“Can we do it?” she asked without slowing down. “Will we really be able to open a breach from this Lyoko to the real one from the present?”

X.A.N.A. burst out laughing.

“You’ll see,” he said to her. “Together, we’re capable of anything.”

They quickly crossed the final stretch and stopped one step from the tower. Gnarled roots like tentacles sprung from the ground, twisting and winding around the base of the structure that glowed of its own light.

Aelita extended a hand and saw her fingers disappear through the curved wall, creating small ripples on its surface. She crossed through the entrance of the tower like a ghost.

She found herself in a dark space illuminated only by the fluorescent symbol that was on the ground, formed by circles and lines that represented the eye of X.A.N.A. From outside, the tower seemed as high as a five-storey building, but its inside seemed infinite. Even upon sharpening her view as much as she could, Aelita wasn’t able to make out a ceiling. The young girl knew that in reality there was no ceiling.

She looked at X.A.N.A., took him by the hand, and walked with him to the centre of the eye on the floor.

A strong wind pushed them up, ruffling their clothes and flying the children up at a breakneck speed. They suddenly stopped on a small circular platform that was floating in mid-air. At more or less a metre and a half above the platform, suspended in the air, was a bright screen.

“Be brave,” whispered X.A.N.A.

Aelita nodded. With the box from the Mirror held strongly in one hand, she pressed her other hand on the screen and

suddenly letters appeared on the monitor forming the word *AELITA*.

The walls of the tower became covered with symbols, strange white glyphs that began to glide downward in a cascade of light. X.A.N.A. posed his hands beside the young girl's, completely covering the screen. He closed his eyes and exclaimed:

“Start the procedure.”

Memory attentively listened to absolutely all of Jeremy's words, then stood and left the room. The boy had let her leave. It must be hard on her. Anthea had been kept prisoner by Hannibal Mago for twenty years. A whole life. And now, she had to learn from the mouth of an unknown boy that her husband was dead and that her daughter was still alive, but was thirteen years old instead of twenty-three.

Jeremy sighed. He had avoided telling Anthea certain details, for example, that Aelita was currently on Lyoko with the rest of the kids. He understood how the woman felt, and knowing that her daughter was so close to her might make her feel better, but the young boy had a lot of work to do and needed as much help as possible from both her and Aelita.

He let his fingers fly across the keyboard. He tried a direct attack, using brute force, against the passcode of the factory network, then another. A bit later, he managed to strike down all the protection barriers and immediately conceal his invasion by erasing the registries and some other small tricks.

Lastly, he took advantage of the Internet connection to analyse the state of the transmissions entering and leaving Kad-ic.

The science lab had clearly become the centre of intelligence, harbouring an intense amount of communication. At the moment, through Professor Hertz's computer, about a dozen international telephone conversations were passing.

The one making all these calls couldn't be Professor Hertz. Jeremy had only just seen her a while ago in the factory, taken captive. So then who was it?

The boy focused in on the active computer and opened a chat window.

I am Jeremy, at the factory on the island, he wrote. Who am I talking to?

After several moments, a response arrived: *Dido. Is the connection secure?*

Jeremy couldn't believe his luck. The boss of the men in black had come to France and was at Kad-ic.

I don't know... he typed.

Ok. It is now. I've activated some devices. Are you able to talk?

Jeremy explained the situation to the woman and read her summary of all the latest events, mouth open. The men in black were ready to attack the factory and were trying everything they could to get them all out before having to resort to more extreme measures to stop Mago.

Dido didn't tell him the type of attack that she had in mind, but Jeremy was smart enough to figure it out on his own. National security was at risk, and the agents would act in response using whichever means necessary at their disposal. What was at risk was too important for them to leave the situation unresolved.

The young boy stopped to think, biting his lips. There must be another solution, there must be...

We aren't done yet, he wrote in conclusion. I'll try to get back in touch with you later.

And he closed the window.

The screen in front of Aelita had grown. It was now more or less her height and as wide as a door. It resembled a mirror that would be placed on the inside of a closet door. Except that the young girl was unable to see her reflection in front of her. Instead, she could see a bunch of trees. It was the forest sector of Lyoko.

Ulrich and Eva were sitting on the ground, talking.

"Aelita!" cried Ulrich upon noticing the presence of his friend.

The young man hopped to his feet.

"Wait!" X.A.N.A. kept him back as he began to approach the screen. "I still need to stabilise the connection!"

Beside Ulrich appeared another X.A.N.A. He was exactly identical to the one with Aelita in the tower, and he had the same focused expression on his face.

The two X.A.N.A.s observed each other for a moment from the two sides of the opening, then the one located with Ulrich brought up his hands to support the lower corners of the screen. It seemed to take a great effort on his part as if the breach was trying to close itself by exerting an incredible amount of pressure.

“What’s happening?” asked Aelita with a reedy voice.

The X.A.N.A. by her side gave a tired smile.

“The other part of me is helping me to open the connection now with the real Lyoko. This way, we’ll be able to take care of Yumi and Odd.”

The young man raised his hands towards the sky and used them to summon a new screen. Aelita placed her two hands against it to introduce her activation code and an image formed immediately inside. It was of Odd, who had been waiting impatiently on the third underground floor of the factory. Aelita outstretched a hand towards her friend, and her hands sunk into the smooth surface of the screen, crossing through.

“Quick!” she called out to him. “Come through here!”

Odd gave an expression of pure and simple stupor. He quickly obeyed, crossing through the screen in a jump, suddenly finding himself beside Aelita and X.A.N.A. in the tower.

The young man with black hair closed the portal with a sigh and made another one appear, this time showing Yumi at the command post of the factory. They had nearly suc-

ceeded. The young girl passed through the portal and joined back up with Odd and Aelita inside the tower.

X.A.N.A. closed the breach and approached his copy, who was maintaining the opening to Lyoko. The two X.A.N.A.s stood face to face, legs apart, anchored firmly to the ground, their arms stretched up against the top of the opening. Their faces were tense from all the effort. Aelita could see their muscles shaking under the pressure, which must have been immense.

Yumi jumped through the portal to reach Ulrich and Eva. The young girl clothed as a geisha rushed to embrace the samurai with such love that the two ended up tumbling onto the grass of the forest sector, intertwined.

Odd smiled at Eva before leaping with joy in her direction.

“Aelita,” exhaled the two X.A.N.A.s at the same time, their teeth clenched. “Go. Now. I can’t hold the breach open for much longer.”

The young girl hesitated.

“What about you?” she asked.

“I’ll do what I have to do,” replied the two X.A.N.A.s.

“But...”

“Hurry! That’s an order!”

His tone was so forceful and weak that Aelita obeyed instantly. Odd and Ulrich took her by the arms and the young girl crossed through the screen. She abandoned the Mirror and found herself on Lyoko, close to her friends. The portal

immediately shut behind her with the ferocious snap of a guillotine.

The whirlwind from the implosion tossed X.A.N.A.'s particles with it, or rather, the ones of the X.A.N.A. who had been stuck within the Mirror. The artificial intelligence's passage wasn't physical. A blast of bits of information crossed the software of the portal and entered Lyoko, where the unification procedure that had been awaiting them immediately executed.

The experiences and thoughts that had occupied the body of the first X.A.N.A. were divided up, analysed and assimilated into the larger X.A.N.A. awaiting it. It was like a stream that after having finally crossed the mountains met up with the plains where it could merge with the main river. But it was also something different, something more, like a large explosion.

X.A.N.A. felt the power surging through him, making him tremble with excitement. He was alive.

He was a mathematical machine, and the principles of mathematics confirmed that the whole was equal to the sum of its parts. But upon reunifying himself, he became something greater than his individual pieces.

He was now a person. And this person needed to find his outlet through something physical, through a body.

X.A.N.A. laughed, and his laughter shook the eternally still trees of Lyoko and ruffled the hair of the children who were watching him from the centre of the clearing.

He was about to reunite with them, become one of them. He knew that by accepting his new human dimension, he would lose a lot of his powers. He could no longer abandon his body, for example, to enter another's and control them. But that didn't matter to him. To be a person was what was really important to him. To become human. This was his choice, his destiny, and he was ready to accept it with all of its consequences.

X.A.N.A. gave his body form. He let Lyoko construct the identity of its guardian for the last time. He transformed himself into a tall, thin, young boy, dressed in a tight-fitting outfit.

His hair was completely dishevelled, except that it was no longer black, but the colour of wheat left to ripen in the sun.

Aelita approached him and extended a hand towards him.

"Is it you?" she asked him. "You're X.A.N.A.?"

The young boy nodded his head and gave a slight bow.

"I did what I had to do. Thanks to you, Aelita, I'm now a new person. The guardian of Lyoko is from now on a child, just like you."

11

THE CODES ENIGMA



The children were in the forest sector of Lyoko. They had talked for hours, bringing each other up-to-date with the latest events, preparing and rejecting new plans to get the Green Phoenix out of the factory once and for all.

Aelita contemplated her friends with a smile on her lips. Yumi and Ulrich were finally reunited, and they were now sitting side by side, shoulder to shoulder, their hands brushing now and then.

Odd and Eva had also found each other again. They had really only just met each other, as the Eva the boy knew previously had been under X.A.N.A.'s control. But they had immediately began to talk to each other, first in some amusing macaronic English invented by Odd, and then in French. They were now both laughing softly, and Odd was employing his usual repertoire of jokes and quips for seducing girls.

All they were missing was Jeremy. Aelita sighed. She would have liked for him to be there with them. How was he doing? What was happening in reality now that Professor Hertz and the others had been captured by the terrorists?

X.A.N.A., who was serenely contemplating the Lyoko sky, turned towards her.

“Do you want to speak to Jeremy?” he asked.

Aelita stared at him, surprised.

“You can read minds now?”

The blond-haired boy laughed.

“Of course not... I can just sense Jeremy’s presence. He’s working on a computer connected to the factory command post. He’s alone at the moment, so if you want, I can establish a safe connection.”

Aelita enthusiastically accepted and leapt up.

“Guys, listen!” she exclaimed. “X.A.N.A. is about to get us into contact with Jeremy!”

Ulrich nodded in approval and Odd clapped.

“Great! We’re going to need our know-it-all friend to get out of this mess!”

X.A.N.A. raised his hands up and drew a square. From his fingertips, a screen began to take shape, darkening and after several instants showing Jeremy’s face.

Aelita observed him with concern. The boy was paler than usual, and seemed exhausted. He had enormous dark rings under his eyes.

“Hi,” Jeremy murmured. “How are you going?”

Odd leapt to his feet and took the opportunity to put on a show as he updated his friend on the latest news. They had escaped the Hermitage through the Mirror and finally all reunited on Lyoko. X.A.N.A. was now on their side, and the children were now waiting for the right time to strike.

Jeremy listened to the monologue in silence, occasionally stealing a furtive glance or two at Aelita.

“The situation,” he began to explain when Odd finished his performance, “is more complicated than we first thought. Mago has threatened to plunge the whole of France into chaos, and the men in black are getting ready to attack the factory. I think that if they don’t manage to stop the Green Phoenix, they’re going to reduce it to ashes.”

Aelita covered her mouth with her hands.

“But that’s not possible!” she then exclaimed. “That would kill us all!”

X.A.N.A. shook his head before speaking.

“But without me, Mago can’t use Lyoko. And I haven’t the slightest intention of helping him.”

“But he can force you to,” Jeremy observed. “If you don’t do as he says, he’ll shut down the supercomputer... What’s more, our parents are now his prisoners. He can force us to do whatever he wants.”

“What are you thinking?” asked Aelita.

Jeremy smiled before responding to her.

“First of all, I’m going to need help from you and X.A.N.A. We need to use the Code Down and the codes contained in Richard’s palm-computer...”

Memory trembled as she entered the nomadic tent. She sometimes got the feeling that the boss of the Green Phoenix was capable of reading her deepest thoughts. What Jeremy had told her had made her realise why: she was his prisoner for twenty years, and so it was really very logical that he had gotten to know her so well.

This is why the next task would be so difficult for Memory to overcome. She had to make herself appear as she always had: the subdued, faithful and obedient assistant. She couldn’t allow the slightest hint to betray her.

“Welcome,” said Mago as he gestured, inviting her to sit on the cushions.

Near him sat Grigory Nictapolus. For once, the man wasn’t accompanied by his two dogs.

“Can I help you, Sir?” Memory asked, keeping her head low and sitting primly, as she usually did.

“Perhaps,” he responded. “Some people tried to infiltrate the Hermitage tonight. We captured almost all of them. But the brats managed to escape at the last moment, using the Hermitage scanner to enter Lyoko.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“The problem,” Mago explained, “is that there’s nobody on Lyoko. I used the command post personally and I activat-

ed all the search programs to localise them... But to no avail. They've escaped." Mago paused and smiled, and his wolf-like eyes looked Memory from head to toe from beneath the brim of his hat before changing the subject without warning. "I decided to begin to use the supercomputer to deal a decisive blow. But in order to do this, we need to be on Lyoko. I don't trust X.A.N.A. He behaves like he should and his robots were of huge help to us, but I fear that he's now thinking of playing a dirty trick on us."

"And what do I...?" Memory asked him, not understanding.

"I want you to prepare a device that can be used to utilise Lyoko's powers without needing to enter the virtual world. The fact that this is a difficult project doesn't interest me, nor do the technical miracles you'll have to invent. I want you to build this machine and I want it now."

A soldier had entered the office to bring him something to eat: a slice of mouldy bread and a can of disgusting tuna. The man had remained there to observe Jeremy menacingly until he finished eating, before standing behind him to observe the computer monitor. The boy made it look like he was working, blindly opening windows and showing the soldier screens full of incomprehensible symbols. Finally, by chance, the man decided to leave. Jeremy seized the opportunity to immediately re-establish the connection with Lyoko.

His friends had moved to a tower in the forest sector and were sitting in a circle on the fluorescent platform shaped like the eye of X.A.N.A.

When he succeeded in establishing contact, X.A.N.A. was the first to raise his head.

“There you are.”

“Yes. I ran into a little hitch. Well, how are you getting along?”

The blond teen gave a hint of a bent smile.

“I ran the text of the Code Down I memorised from Hertz’s dossier through a database in the supercomputer.”

“And I transmitted the contents of Richard’s palm-computer to you,” Jeremy replied. “We can begin!”

X.A.N.A. and Aelita stood and moved to the centre of the tower. They then took flight and flew away from the others, touching down on the suspended platform.

Jeremy observed the workspace X.A.N.A. had prepared, flabbergasted: there was a small desk, that seemed to be made of the same smooth, resplendent material as the rest of the tower, and two chairs that floated in the air without any kind of support. Around them flew several dozen screens full of data that X.A.N.A. moved from one side to the other with a simple wave of his hand.

The three children immediately set to work.

Jeremy had often collaborated with Aelita and they were capable of understanding each other on the fly without needing to say a word, but he now felt a little uncomfortable. Ael-

ita was his best friend, more than that, in fact, but only a few hours ago he had spoken to her mother, and he hadn't yet said anything about it to the girl.

Jeremy had good reason not to do it: Memory worked for Hannibal Mago and he hadn't yet decided if he could put his complete trust in the woman. He didn't want to upset Aelita nor give her false hope of having found the mother she had so long been searching for.

And, what's more, there was another thought Jeremy couldn't avoid. It was possible that the factory could be attacked, or that the terrorists could make the first move. Someone could be hurt. And if something happened to Memory...

At that moment, X.A.N.A.'s face lit up in an ample smile. Jeremy marvelled at the changes he had witnessed in the artificial intelligence. He had told them that he had renounced some of his Lyoko powers, but he had gained many more in exchange. He was less obtuse, and even proved to have great intuition. He knew how to laugh and felt good being around the others. In a way, he acted like a slightly older child ready to help them with anything.

"I think I understand!" he exclaimed.

"What is it?" Aelita immediately asked.

"The Code Down. As Professor Hertz told us, it's a program capable of destroying Lyoko. It can erase absolutely every line of programming code and permanently eliminate all of Lyoko's sectors and the First City. It can even kill me."

“How does it work?” asked Jeremy.

“Hopper included a sort of security lock. Once the program is charged in the system, Aelita just needs to go to one of the towers and activate the software by typing *CODE DOWN* on a screen. And that's it.”

Jeremy reopened one of the data-filled screens that he had already seen before and began to reinterpret them based on X.A.N.A.'s suggestions. It was true. He began to see some sense in this mysterious program. Aelita was its cornerstone, the person who could demolish Lyoko and permanently reduce it to ashes with a single action.

In reality, the subject was much more radical than X.A.N.A. had suggested. The Code Down acted on the actual logical components of the supercomputer, altering the circuits and cancelling them out one by one. By using it, the entire factory would become a simple building that had withstood the passage of time for far too long. After having activated the Code Down, the supercomputer would be nothing more than a very expensive heap of scrap.

Aelita got to her feet, looked at Jeremy, and then approached X.A.N.A.

“If this is all true,” she exclaimed, “I promise you that I'll never activate the Code Down. You have my word.”

Jeremy gave a small, sad smile. He hoped with all his heart that Aelita could really keep this promise.

At that moment the office door opened and the boy needed to press the escape key several times to interrupt the connection with Lyoko and close a few windows of code.

He lifted his head and found himself looking at Grigory Nictapolus's dark face.

“Come with me,” said the man sharply.

Richard Dupuis was bound and gagged. He found himself locked in a small, windowless room, splayed on the floor and hurting from head to toe.

In the room with him was only one other person, one of the men in black, but his face was covered by a hood, and Richard couldn't see if he was Lone Wolf, Ferret or Weasel.

Richard was hungry and thirsty. His wetsuit had completely dried and each movement scratched his skin, making him moan in pain. But his main problem was something else: he needed to go to the bathroom. He was perfectly aware that this was a ridiculous need, but he couldn't help it!

The young man arched his sore back backwards and yelped in pure pain. Something had stuck into him, breaking through the soft fabric of his neoprene wetsuit. He began to slither across the floor like a snake. His hands and feet were tied together with small, plastic ties that hurt his wrists and ankles. Slowly, he managed to turn to see what had stuck into him. It was nothing more than a twisted nail that had come out of an old, dust-coloured wall panel.

A nail. A sharp nail.

Richard smiled. He turned back to the other side, pushing his back against the wall. He managed to get the rusted point between his hands in such a way that he could apply pressure on it against his plastic handcuffs. He began to rub.

Grigory Nictapolus led Jeremy to the third underground floor, where the supercomputer's operating core was found.

Of all the places in the factory, the third floor was the one that had always fascinated Jeremy. The supercomputer was Hopper's grandest invention, the one the professor had dedicated the largest part of his life to. And it was where the heart of the machine was located.

The place had now undergone some large changes. Some of the metal planks that made up the flooring had been taken away, and from the gaps sprouted large, colourful cables that connected to several personal computers placed on the floor.

Memory was working, crouched down, placing clips on the supercomputer's connectors, studying operational schemas and taking notes. When Grigory arrived, the woman lifted her head.

"Thank you," she said mechanically. "You can leave us alone now."

"Actually," responded the man with an evil smile, "Mago asked me to not let you out of my sight. Just act like I'm not here. I'll sit here and not bother you at all."

Jeremy bit his lip. He had hoped that he would be able to talk to Memory, but Grigory's presence complicated things.

The woman explained the situation to him: they needed to find a way to control Lyoko without entering it.

“The only way to do something like that,” she said with a sigh, “is create a bot controlled by the computer.”

Jeremy nodded. He had immediately thought of the same thing. A bot was basically a sort of virtual person (like X.A.N.A. himself) that they’d be capable of controlling at will with a simple joystick.

But there was a problem.

“To be able to do something like that,” the boy observed, “we’ll need detailed plans of the supercomputer.”

“Yes,” Memory responded. “That’s why Mago ordered for all this equipment to be prepared. They’re currently extracting the schemas of the circuits.”

Jeremy sat beside the woman, trying to ignore Grigory’s being there, watching them menacingly.

“Would you happen to have a virtual reality helmet?” he asked.

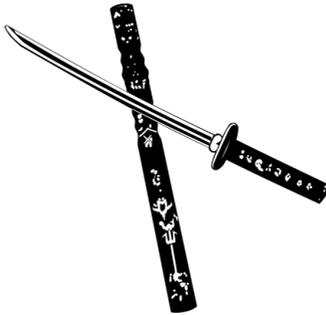
Memory smiled and gave him a pair of dark glasses with lenses large enough to cover half of Jeremy’s face. They had a pair of earpieces attached to the arms.

“Here,” said the woman. “They work using Bluetooth, so all you have to do is put them on, put in the earpieces and press the button.”

Jeremy began to hatch a plan. He could use the glasses to connect to the Mirror. Once there, he could look for new leads for solving the enigma of Richard’s codes.

12

COUNCIL OF WAR



A sudden snap could be heard. The two ends of the handcuffs hit Richard each like the crack of the whip. The boy bit into the gag with force. He was in such pain! But he now had free hands.

He massaged his sore wrists a bit, then hurried to undo the plastic cord that was restraining his feet and removed the dirty cloth that was making it difficult for him to breathe. He opened his mouth, finally filling his lungs with air.

He did it! He had succeeded in removing his handcuffs and could now leave and finally look for a bathroom. He had proved himself smarter than a secret agent.

As the thought crossed his mind, he turned his head. His gaze fixed on one of the men in black, who was moaning and

slowly writhing, tied up with his head covered. He couldn't leave him like that. Even though he was dying to get out of the small room as quickly as possible, he needed to help him.

He sighed, approached the man and removed the cover from his head. It was Weasel.

Richard had been hoping that it would be Lone Wolf, the leader, who seemed to be the most professional of the three. But at least it wasn't Ferret with his lisp that drove him crazy.

"I'll free you right away," the young man whispered to him. "Just give me a moment."

In several minutes, the agent was free and breathing with difficulty.

"How did you manage to get free?" he asked.

Richard pointed out the small nail sticking out from the wall several centimetres from the ground. It was incredible to think that such a tiny piece of metal could be so useful.

Weasel shook his head.

"If my head hadn't been covered, I would have seen it right away! But these criminals know their job well and understand where to look out for danger!"

"Ok, ok!" Richard interrupted, beginning to get impatient. "What are we going to do now?"

"We need to get in contact with Dido. Lone Wolf has a transmitter implanted in one of his teeth, but if he's gagged, he can't use it."

“Ok, then, let’s go find him,” proposed Richard almost at the same time as thinking, *And I hope we’ll come across a bathroom along the way.*

Eva Skinner was beginning to feel bored. They had been shut in this dark tower for a very long time now, X.A.N.A. and Aelita had disappeared, and she really wanted to take a walk.

Fortunately, she had met Odd. Eva’s memories about him were somewhat confusing, though...

From time to time, things would pop back up in her head of what she had done or said while under the control of X.A.N.A., but the images seemed distant to her, as if they belonged to the mind of someone else.

For X.A.N.A., Odd simply seemed to be an idiot. Eva, however, found him nice. He always had a joke to tell, and he was trying to entertain her as best as he could.

And his catboy getup was pretty interesting. In any case, it was better than his friend, Ulrich’s, Japanese clothes... Furthermore, Odd seemed to be a real expert in music. He knew the Ceb Digitals and owned all their soundtracks. They at least had something in common. But she was so bored...

Odd stood suddenly, jumped on the wall, ran several metres towards the ceiling, let himself hang from the smooth surface with the claws from his hands and his feet, performed an elegant pirouette and landed in front of Eva with a bow.

Surprised, the young girl applauded.

“Stop clowning around, Odd!” Ulrich reprimanded him, who had been until then off to the side, talking with Yumi.

Odd stuck his tongue out at him.

“I’m getting bored! I mean, we’re here, stuck in a tower on Lyoko, while who knows what is happening in the real world!”

“It’s true,” said Yumi. “I’m really worried about my parents and all the others. Let’s hope that nothing happens to them.”

Eva shrugged. These French kids were really weird.

“And what is it you all want to do?” she asked. “You won’t stop talking about this Green Phoenix, but they’re adults, and they have weapons! How do you plan on beating them? With a pair of wooden geisha sandals?”

Yumi stood, her cheeks reddened in anger.

“I have weapons!” she exclaimed.

Angrily, the young girl grabbed the fans from her kimono sash, opened them and threw them.

They looked like a pair of boomerangs headed towards Eva at full speed.

The young girl moved instinctively. She covered her face with her hands to protect herself and gave out a sharp cry.

“AaaAAAH!!”

She opened her eyes wide in surprise. Eva had always had good lungs, but her voice was exceptional this time!

Before her mouth, the air had taken the form of musical notes in different colours that flew into Yumi like a blast of projectiles!

The young girl in Japanese clothing recovered her fans from the air as they returned to her like boomerangs and used them like a shield against the notes, which were deflected and stuck into the wall around the tower. They must have been really sharp.

“We finally discovered Eva’s power!” commented Odd with a teasing smile.

“Yeah,” observed Ulrich. “Too bad that we can’t have our Lyoko powers in the real world. Otherwise, we could really show these terrorists a thing or two.”

“Bringing Lyoko powers to the real world...” spoke X.A.N.A., pensively.

Eva looked towards the ceiling. He and Aelita were floating towards them, descending through the air as if they were being held up by thousands of small, invisible cables.

The young blond smiled.

“You know what? Maybe we could do just that!”

The door to the storeroom was locked. Weasel wouldn’t let himself be discouraged by this fact though and stuck the rusty nail into the side of the door to pick the lock.

Then he gave Richard a wink.

“See?” he said. “I’m a real professional!”

“Maybe so,” admitted the young man. “But what do you think we should do now? There could be guards on the other side.”

“That won’t be a problem. I’m also an expert in martial arts.”

Richard hoped with all his heart for this to be true. Shaking, he reached out his hand and opened the door wide.

He found himself facing a hallway. Through a small window at the end, the afternoon sun’s light shone through. A lot of time had passed since they’d been captured. Almost an entire day, in fact!

But there were no soldiers in sight.

Richard and Weasel left the small room. Throughout the length of the hall were other doors, all metal and identical to one another, like the one they had just exited.

They turned a doorknob. An empty room.

Trying not to make any noise, they tried again with the second door, which opened with a creak. Inside the room were two soldiers watching a small television.

Alarmed by the noise, the two men sprung to their feet. Weasel threw himself at the closest one, launching into a wild attack of rapid karate strikes. The other man observed Richard, analysing him for a moment, then grabbed a large gun from his belt.

The young man began to back up, but tripped on one of the uneven slabs of floor and fell forward, hitting the soldier in the gut with his head.

The man grunted and kicked Richard in the stomach, immediately knocking the wind out of him. He rolled on the floor. The soldier was already on top of him, ready to give him

another kick but to the face, when the young man heard Weasel's commanding voice.

"Hands in the air, my friend."

Richard turned to see that the man in black had knocked out his opponent and had taken possession of his sub-machine gun. Weasel gestured towards Richard to get up, then forced the soldier to kneel by his unconscious partner.

"Good," he exclaimed. "Richard, help me tie them up."

Ulrich took out his katana from its sheath and played with it, tossing it from one hand to another, making it spin in the air. On Lyoko, his sword was so sharp that it could cut through anything. It could cut a Manta Ray in half and even cut rocks into pieces with one slice. Having it with him in the real world would be fantastic... But the young boy doubted that it would be possible.

"The thing is located in the First City," X.A.N.A. explained. "The castle allows me to give life to anything I want and materialise it in the real world. For example, I could create an entire army of robots."

"I knew it was you," observed Odd. "You put us in one heck of a position by attacking Kadic."

X.A.N.A. lowered his eyes and held his gaze at the ground.

"I'm really sorry, but at the time, my priorities were...a bit different. In any case, like I said before, thanks to the castle, I can create an army, then use the towers to send it to the real world."

“And that will make the creatures appear in the scanners at the factory,” Ulrich completed.

“Well, yes, precisely.”

The samurai boy raised his arms up high with enthusiasm.

“But...that’s great! Then, we really can win against all the tough soldiers of the Green Phoenix.”

“All five of you will,” X.A.N.A. said immediately afterwards. “I’ll be staying here to control my creatures from a distance. But we have another problem.”

Yumi, who up until now had remained silent, nodded with a taciturn look about her face.

“Mago could shut down the supercomputer at any moment,” she said.

“Exactly,” Aelita confirmed. “That’s why we need to speak to Jeremy. We need to find a way to prevent Mago from using the command post until we’ve finished our attack. But how can we contact him?”

X.A.N.A. smiled.

“At the moment, your friend is connected to the Mirror. Opening another portal to that virtual world would be too complicated... But I can try to communicate with him.”

“And Jeremy will find a way to get us out of here,” Odd approved. “Perfect. Let’s call him right away. It’s time we have a council of war!”

Thanks to his virtual reality glasses, Jeremy could observe the Mirror from the outside as if it were a film on television. And he was watching a really interesting scene now.

It was the 3rd of June, 1994, and Professor Hopper was in the attic of the Hermitage. He seemed nervous, pacing forward and back while mumbling to himself something about the Code Down.

“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...”

Several minutes later, Aelita entered the room. Jeremy’s heart sank upon seeing her. What he was seeing in front of his eyes was a recording from ten years ago, but Aelita was still exactly identical.

At that moment, Jeremy decided that he needed to find a way to describe her to her mother. Anthea hadn’t yet recovered all her memories, but the boy had noticed a strange happiness about her. And the tears.

“Can I help you with anything?” Aelita said to her father in the Mirror.

“Perhaps you can,” the professor replied. “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.”

These words activated something in Jeremy’s head, and his brain began to work at full speed, like a finger following a complex treasure map. The Code Down. Hopper, who needed

an unbelievable amount of space to save a backup copy and didn't know what effect that would have on Aelita. The incomprehensible codes of Richard's palm-computer. An activation program, then something else.

Jeremy smiled.

Professor Hopper was a genius.

Several moments later, before Jeremy's surprised eyes, appeared the face of a boy with blond hair. X.A.N.A. winked at him.

"I've detected that you can't speak to me," he said. "But as long as you can hear me, that'll be enough. Your friends and I have decided that..."

Jeremy listed carefully to X.A.N.A.'s idea. It could work well. All that was necessary was to work out a time and act all at once. They really had a chance at taking down the Green Phoenix!

And so, Jeremy left his hunch to the side in a corner of his memory for now.

13

THE DECISIVE NIGHT



Hertz and Lone Wolf had been placed in separate rooms from the others. The man in black and the ex-army major had been hooded, while the children's parents had only been tied up and gagged, just like Richard. He and Weasel had freed them as quickly as possible, and they had then all regrouped in Lone Wolf's cell, which was the largest and had a small, barred window. It was too short and narrow for them to break open and escape, but it was enough to let a small amount of the gloomy night air in.

The whole group was tired and drained of strength. Michel Belpois had a black eye and Ferret, who couldn't move his right arm, wore the submachine gun over his shoulder.

But they were free once more, they had a weapon and they could finally make their move.

Richard saw Lone Wolf stick one of his hands into his mouth. The man poked and prodded around a bit until he managed to pull out a tooth. It was a large molar that seemed authentic, but the man in black unscrewed one side, revealing a miniscule button which he then pressed with a thumb.

“Is that it?” asked Walter Stern with a critical look.

Lone Wolf gave a small, knowing smile.

“This is actually a marvellous, very advanced piece of technology that I had implanted not long before I parachuted down to Kadic. This false tooth contains a very powerful Morse code transmitter... It can function almost anywhere, from the furthest deserts to the cement bunkers built below the ground. With it, I can get in contact with Dido. Of course, it’s reserved for situations of the utmost urgency.”

“So, get to work,” commented Hertz dryly. “The situation could become critical at any moment.”

Lone Wolf began to press the button at regular intervals: *short-long-short-short-long...*

“What should I transmit?” he asked.

“Communicate to Dido that we’re free,” said Professor Hertz. “And that we intend to attack the terrorists. It’s almost nine o’clock and I imagine that Dido will need about two hours to prepare. So tell her that we’re going to act at midnight. And that we’re going to need reinforcements.”

Lone Wolf nodded and continued to press the button on the miniscule object.

During this time, Richard turned to the professor. He was mortified. Freeing all of them had been the most heroic action in his life. But he didn't feel ready to confront the soldiers in direct combat. He was nothing more than a meagre, freckled engineering student, while the heroes on TV were all tall and big like closets, with enormous, muscly arms.

"It's to be a while before midnight comes," he observed. "What are we going to do in the meantime?"

"To be able to attack the men of the Green Phoenix, we're going to need weapons," Professor Hertz responded resolutely, "so we're going to have to find ourselves some."

9 AT FACTRY FREE AND ARMED. TRRORISTS 90+ ATAK 00:00. REINFORCMENTS! MAYBE CHILDS MAX CAUTION.

The message arrived on Dido's mobile phone along with the low ring that indicated urgent communications. The identification code was Lone Wolf's. He had used the satellite Morse code transmitter. The device alone cost a small fortune. Each letter was sent to a spy satellite network in orbit around the Earth, then was translated from Morse code and sent to Dido wherever she was at the time. This simple message had cost the Agency nearly five hundred million dollars. But it was money well spent.

Dido smiled. She was still in the science laboratory at Kadic Academy, and this day had been one of the most tiring

of her entire life. She had spoken for hours and hours with important representatives of the French government, higher-ups in the army, and Maggie, who was situated at their centre of operations in Brussels.

Dido had given explanations, protested, fought, disputed, elaborated and rejected action plans. She hadn't even had the time to eat anything; she was limited to drinking enormous cups of steaming, sugary coffee constantly to be able to stay awake.

The boss of the men in black began to hammer her computer keyboard impetuously until Maggie's face appeared on her screen. Her secretary seemed calm and reposed, as if she hadn't flown there from Washington less than twenty-four hours earlier to resolve a problem that threatened to destroy the world.

"Madam," she said.

Dido activated all the anti-listening devices she had installed on the computer when she arrived and signalled for Maggie to do the same.

For an instant, the woman felt her hands tremble. As highly sophisticated as her programs were, from within Lyoko, Hannibal Mago could decrypt them effortlessly. If the boss of the Green Phoenix had already obtained full control over the supercomputer, Dido's task was doomed to failure.

"There will be an attack on the factory," she explained to her assistant. "I'll send you the time on your mobile phone, just in case."

“Of course, Madam.”

“I want you to immediately organise a combat-ready team of men. It’s a level delta red mission. Maximum priority.”

“Of course, Madam.”

Dido sighed. Now came the more difficult part.

“The Black Raven mission is not postponed,” she murmured, “but it needs to be ready to intervene at X hour and thirty minutes, if the infantry’s attack fails.”

On the screen, Maggie’s face didn’t even flinch.

Dido cut the connection. Black Raven was the name of the men in black’s fighter-bomber, which carried a large load of bombs and missiles under its wings that were capable of pulverising the entire island on which the old factory sat. The maximum she had managed to obtain, after all the hours of negotiation with the higher-ups in the French government and army, was that the destruction of the supercomputer would not be carried out before half past midnight. In other words, there was a very small timeframe in which to have her men carry out the attack on the factory, neutralise the terrorists and contact the pilot to abort the attack.

Tonight, everyone’s lives would be hanging by a thread.

The children had transformed the Lyoko tower into a training camp.

X.A.N.A. had created some Manta Rays that were whizzing about in the air, firing dazzling blue lasers. Ulrich attacked the monsters with his katana. Odd ran on the walls

and shot at the Manta Rays using his laser arrows, which fired out of his gloves. Yumi threw her fans, sharp as daggers. Aelita and Eva, however, were practising some distance from the others.

Aelita stopped for a moment and asked Eva to suspend their exercises. All the shouting and screaming was hurting her ears, and she also wanted to talk to X.A.N.A.

The boy was seated cross-legged on the tower floor and kept his eyes riveted towards the ceiling, as if he was concentrating on a very difficult problem. Aelita approached him and placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Is everything alright?” she asked him, slight worry in her tone of voice.

“I...” X.A.N.A. interrupted the sentence he had started, and his eyes met Aelita’s. For a moment, the girl saw them change colour, going from red to dark blue, then purple. “I’m not really human,” he exclaimed. “I mean, I feel different than before, I’m feeling emotions and I know that we’re all friends. But I’m still a creature of Lyoko. You see?” he gestured to everything around them. “I created the Manta Rays, I used the towers to connect me to the real world and I still have lots of powers. I can’t enter other people’s minds, but I can still change the colour of my hair and eyes.”

Aelita smiled.

“You don’t have a physical body, and that’s what lets you use your powers. But it’s not a body that makes a person human, but how they think and behave. That’s why I don’t

care if you can intercept telephone calls anywhere in the world, or create Manta Rays or other things like that. To me, you're as human as I am, or Jeremy, or Ulrich, or..."

The young man sighed.

"Speaking of intercepting calls... I think I've just discovered something important."

X.A.N.A. stood up and pointed his hands towards the ceiling. The Manta Rays disappeared into small puffs of smoke.

Odd, who had managed to get on the back of one of them and was hanging onto the horns on its mouth like a cowboy at a rodeo, fell to the floor, where he landed in a somersault.

X.A.N.A. drew a square in the air, and inside it appeared digital numbers. *02:30:59*. An instant later the *59* became a *58*, then *57*... It was a countdown.

Aelita looked at the boy, slightly perplexed, and he began to explain.

"For the last half hour, I've managed to listen in on some very interesting communications. The first came from the factory: a satellite transmission in very advanced Morse code. It said that the others have managed to free themselves and get some weapons. They intend to attack the terrorists at midnight and have solicited Dido's help."

"Wow!" exclaimed Odd, impressed.

"Yeah," Ulrich immediately added. "Now I understand why everyone's so interested in Lyoko and the supercomputer. If it's used in the right way, its power to control everything really gets everyone on edge."

X.A.N.A. nodded.

“And that’s not all,” he added. “What’s more, I listened to Dido’s response. The men in black are ready to attack the factory, also at midnight, in order to accompany the attack from inside with one from outside.”

“And we’ll be there too,” commented Yumi with a smile. “We can co-ordinate our assault with theirs, materialise ourselves with our powers and deliver the *coup de grâce* to the Green Phoenix.”

“Yes, but there’s also something else!” X.A.N.A. exclaimed. “Dido spoke of an operation called Black Raven. It’s her plan B, in case the attack on the factory fails. But I couldn’t find even a hint of any information on Black Raven. They must have organised the mission using non-electronic communications...or something like that.”

“Black Raven doesn’t sound very friendly,” Odd mumbled. “It could be what Jeremy was telling us about before: the men in black are equipped to destroy the factory to get rid of the terrorists once and for all. We’ll need to keep our eyes wide open and...”

Aelita approached X.A.N.A. and winked at him.

“Let’s do this one step at a time,” she said. “Our current priority is to warn Jeremy about when the attack will be. He’ll need to find a way to get Hannibal Mago’s remote control before midnight tonight.”

Jeremy had never been in the factory's machinery room. It was a gigantic room; so long it was hard to see where it ended. There were enormous machines all over the place, turned off and covered in dust: rusty metal turbines, pipes, valves, cranks, compressors and immense electrical quadrants with all the interrupters lowered.

The Green Phoenix soldiers had transformed this place into a cafeteria, lining up lots of small tables of different shape and colour along the central corridor of the room.

About seventy of them were now seated with their rifles and submachine guns resting on their tables. They silently ate disgusting-looking bowls of soup of undefinable colour and their eyes were glued to portable televisions placed at regular intervals throughout the room.

Jeremy entered accompanied by Memory and Grigory Nictapolis, who hadn't let them out of his sight since mid-day. They found empty seats and sat. Grigory raised his hand and grunted at a soldier wearing a ridiculous apron that had at a time in the past been white, hurried to bring them three bowls.

Although the soup didn't look appealing, its taste would undoubtedly be even worse. To Jeremy it seemed to be a mixture of canned meat, spinach and dirty socks. But he forced it down. He would need his strength to remain on the ball and help his friends. To avoid thinking about the horrible soup, the child began to watch the television.

It was the evening news broadcast. On the lowest part of the screen headlines from different stories scrolled past, and on the right the time was superimposed over the top, showing that it was shortly after ten o'clock. The information was the same as always: a war in a far-off country, politicians battling over incomprehensible agendas, and the results of soccer matches.

Not a single reference to the terrorists, the men in black, or the old factory. Jeremy smiled. Dido was a true professional. She had managed to keep this whole affair under wraps.

Suddenly, all the televisions changed channel without anyone having touched the controls. The screens remained dark for an instant, then all began to show an old black-and-white film with two samurais fighting on the edge of a cliff, attacking and defending furiously with their katanas. After several seconds, the images changed again to show a cartoon with a cat walking on its hind legs, trying to trap its mortal enemy, a mouse that was much more cunning than he.

A few soldiers started to grouse. One of them stood up to whack the television, but the screen beat him to it and returned to the news. Jeremy's eyes flew to the time on the lower right, which now said *00:00*. It only lasted an instant before it returned to the correct reading, *22:16*.

The boy began to think. The black screen, the men in black. The samurai and the cat, like Ulrich and Odd. And the time: midnight. X.A.N.A. was capable of telling when Jeremy

was in front of his computer, and so he should also be able to tell when he was watching TV. Maybe these strange clips were a coded message for him.

Jeremy's head hurt. Maybe he was going crazy. But no; it couldn't be a coincidence. It was clearly a message. Midnight, the time of the combined attack by his friends and the men in black. The boy inhaled his horrible soup in a single gulp and stood.

"We'd best get back to work," he said to Memory. "We still have a lot of work to do before we finish Mago's bot... And I've just had an idea."

Throughout his criminal career, Grigory Nictapolus had learned never to trust anything or anyone. Especially what seemed to be a simple coincidence.

The man had immediately noticed the time on the news report changing, but what had made him even more suspicious was Jeremy's behaviour.

Before dinner, the agent had gone to see Hannibal and Scipio, who had been chained up in front of the factory's tall front door, to bring them two bones. They had seemed nervous, their ears rigid and their noses sniffing away at the cold night air.

His dogs' instincts were rarely wrong. They sensed that the situation was nearing fever pitch. Grigory knew that with each hour that passed, Mago's game became more and more dangerous.

The leader of the Green Phoenix knew to keep the French government in check, and he had no doubt that the army was preparing a counter-attack. There would be a battle, and soon. And there would be no guarantee that Mago would win.

Grigory smiled. As usual, he managed on his own in one way or another. He had a natural instinct for abandoning ship the second it began to sink. For now, he needed to continue to keep an eye on the boy. Although he was only thirteen, he seemed much more cunning than most adults.

The man stood and grabbed Jeremy's shoulder. He gripped extra hard to make sure he hurt him.

"Let's go," he exhorted. "I'll accompany you."

14

JEREMY'S RUSE



Jeremy observed the maze of golden glyphs along the immense column of the supercomputer, then leaned towards the command terminal.

He immediately saw the coded message that was blinking on the screen, protected by a passcode. Jeremy typed in *AEL-ITA* and read the contents of the window. It was from X.A.N.A., who was warning him that the attack was scheduled for midnight, along with a mysterious plan B called Black Raven.

Jeremy smiled. He had correctly interpreted the signal from the news broadcast... But having a bit more information wouldn't hurt. What did Dido have in mind? And what exactly was Black Raven?

The boy looked at Memory, who had gotten back to work on the other terminal, from the corner of his eye. Grigory wasn't watching their screens at the moment, but speaking in a hushed voice over his walkie-talkie. He decided to take advantage of the situation and opened a window to chat with his friend's mother.

Jeremy had waited too long for the right moment to tell her the whole truth about Aelita. He had started to realise that the perfect occasion would never arrive. The boy tightly closed his eyelids behind his glasses, held his breath and wrote in the chat window.

I haven't told you everything up until now, but...I know where Aelita is currently.

Jeremy didn't dare raise his head to see the woman's reaction and continued to concentrate solely on his computer. Several seemingly never-ending seconds passed before the cursor blinked and wrote out the response, *Where?*

Nearby here, Jeremy wrote. Closer than you think. She is virtualised on Lyoko with our friends.

Another pause.

Is she ok? Why didn't you tell me earlier?

Jeremy smiled. He could feel the torrent of questions the woman must be wondering, beating behind her simple words, her worries, her desire to learn every last detail about the daughter that she never had the chance to know.

The boy cracked his knuckles and began to drum out his response on the keyboard. He told her that Aelita had decid-

ed to stay in the Mirror and that she had convinced X.A.N.A. to rediscover his humanity and ally with the kids. Aelita was a good girl, clever and brave, who had faced countless difficulties without ever having lost her will to fight. And now, she herself wanted to help against the terrorists.

Jeremy sent this long message, waited several moments for the woman to have the time to read it, and then typed out, *Will you help us too?*

Her response arrived at the same instant, *You can count on it.*

Memory was barely breathing. She felt like her head was about to explode. Aelita, her daughter, was there, so close, on Lyoko with her friends. And she was going to head into battle tonight.

Jeremy was excused from not having revealed the truth earlier. She understood his reasons. He really liked her daughter and didn't want to hurt her or give her false hope. She could once again hold Aelita in her arms once this nightmare was over.

The woman felt a new force running through her veins, giving her courage. She was no longer Memory, but Anthea. She was a mother and would fight to see her daughter again.

Paying careful attention to Grigory so as not to make him suspicious, she took the golden chain that she was wearing between her two fingers and used her thumb to turn the base and light it up. She saw the *A* for Anthea was illuminated and

pressed on it. A signal. She wanted to tell Aelita that she was alive, that she was here again. and that she would be by her side throughout this long night.

Memory waited several seconds until she felt her necklace begin to vibrate. Her daughter was thinking of her and had responded to let her know she's doing well!

This small gesture gave Memory the final ounce of courage she was lacking. She suddenly felt serene and at peace. She stood.

"Jeremy," she said. "We did it. The program is ready. We have a robot capable of moving in Lyoko without needing someone to enter the virtual world."

The boy winked at her.

"Perfect!" he exclaimed. "We only need one more thing to be able to activate the program..."

The boy's bluff was convincing. Memory hoped his voice would seem solid enough. She glanced at her watch. It was quarter past eleven. They needed to hurry.

"Take us to Mago," she said to Grigory. "We need to speak with him. It's urgent."

Aelita leapt to her feet. She thought for a moment that she was in a dream. But this wasn't the fruit of her imagination. It was really happening. Her necklace had vibrated, gently tickling her skin.

Someone had activated it and sent her a signal. She removed the chain from around her neck and held it above her

head as if it were a trophy for all the world to see how the *A* for Anthea was now illuminated.

The young girl looked at her friends one by one. X.A.N.A., Yumi, Ulrich, Odd and Eva had their gaze on her. Yumi had her hands together against her mouth. Odd had a smile that widened more and more on his catboy face.

"It's my mother!" cried Aelita. "She's alive! She's alive!"

The children ran to her side and held her in their arms in a group hug filled with euphoric laughter and happy, but shocked expressions.

"You did it, Aelita!" exclaimed Ulrich. "I knew that you'd manage to find her sooner or later."

The young girl was still staring at the necklace as if it were a magic amulet.

"Unbelievable," she murmured. "Now, I just need to figure out where she is, what place in the world, and then I can..."

X.A.N.A. closed his eyes for a moment, and when he reopened them, he gave a smile.

"I think I can help out," he explained. "I just intercepted a communication that..."

"Where?" Aelita interrupted him. "Where's my mother?"

"She's currently chatting with Jeremy. Your mum is at the factory, and she's going to help us. Now, she and Jeremy will ask Mago to accompany them, then they'll try to take the box that can shut down the supercomputer."

Aelita couldn't believe her ears. The news that her mother was alive had already been quite a shock... But the idea that

she was there in the factory all along without Jeremy saying a word to her about it?! However, she then realised that it was something Jeremy would surely have told her about. Aelita trusted Jeremy. How could he tell her about X.A.N.A. and their plans to save the world and leave out her mother?

“It’s not right!” she protested. “If Jeremy knew that my mother was being held captive by the terrorists, he would have told me right away!”

Yumi approached her friend and wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

“He probably just didn’t want you to worry about her... And he’d want to surprise you.”

“The biggest surprise of your life,” Ulrich immediately added.

The young girl sighed. She knew her friends were right. Jeremy had always been by her side, proving he was more than just a friend to her. If her mother was in grave danger, he could have decided to avoid worrying her about it. She would play a very important role tonight and needed to stay sure of herself and as focused as possible. But her objective now was more than encouraging enough. The thought of being able to hug her mother once again made her feel the warmth in her heart of having family waiting for her.

The old factory was like a labyrinth. From the gigantic central space, that in another day and age had housed the core of its production, left a myriad of hallways, maintenance

rooms, small passageways and galleries. Richard lost his sense of direction inside and unquestioningly followed the directions given to him by Professor Hertz and Lone Wolf.

The hallway leading to all the rooms in which they were trapped ended with a bright red door held shut by a chain and a large padlock. The keys were attached to the belt of one of the soldiers that Richard and Weasel had taken down.

The young man figured that, all in all, finishing off the men of the Green Phoenix would be an easy job. He couldn't have been more wrong.

From the hall, they ended up in another room and found themselves face-to-face with a group of guards. The battle proved to be a challenge. Mago's soldiers were armed to the teeth, and they immediately opened fire on them. Fortunately, they were using silencers, which prevented any noise from reaching possible reinforcements.

Lone Wolf and Hertz immediately went on the offensive, ignoring the danger posed by all the guns aiming at them, while Richard stayed just behind, watching the terrifying battle take place in disbelief as knives and hits to the stomach and groin were dealt from one side to the other.

At last, the men in black managed to put an end to the fight, and the group headed towards a room where six soldiers were guarding several crates full of guns. Lone Wolf had a pistol in hand and took the first shot in another shooting match.

Richard hadn't been able to see anything, because he was too preoccupied with pressing his body flat up against a column and hoping his heart wouldn't explode at the rate it was beating. Even so, he could hear the whistling of silencers and the muffled blows of fists and kicks against bone and flesh. Once the young man mustered up the courage to leave his hiding spot, he realised that the enemies were already on the ground with their hands tied up. Lone Wolf and Hertz handed out guns to everyone in the group.

"There's sixteen minutes left until the attack," said Walter Stern, while looking at his watch.

"We'll make it," declared Weasel.

Richard squatted in front of the door at the end of the hall to examine the lock. He motioned to the others to remain quiet.

"We can't go through here," he whispered.

The young man stood to let Lone Wolf personally examine it. On the other side of the door was a long row of tables with soldiers resting, playing cards and watching television. They must have been at least thirty men.

"You're right," nodded Dido's agent. "They would neutralise us without breaking a sweat."

The small group stopped to think for a moment, until Richard pointed out the vent near the ground. It was wide enough for an adult to crawl through.

"But the diving suits will prevent us from getting through," he explained.

Hertz looked over at the Green Phoenix soldiers against the wall with their mouths taped shut.

"It's time for a change of clothes," the professor noted.

Hannibal Mago's nomadic tent smelled of sandalwood and cinnamon. The leader of the Green Phoenix was stretched out on a pile of cushions in a lazy fashion, and he reminded Jeremy of a vizier listening to a report from his servants.

The boy took a deep breath to calm his nerves before beginning to speak.

"Sir, we did what you asked. We built a virtual bot, or rather, a robot capable of entering Lyoko and controlling its towers. I don't mean to brag, but I think our artificial intelligence may even be more sophisticated than X.A.N.A."

Mago raised an eyebrow to the brim of his hat.

"You sure didn't take much time creating such a prodigy." Memory hurried to give Jeremy some help.

"That's because we were able to obtain a large portion of code from X.A.N.A. himself. The important thing is that the program is almost ready to be put into action..."

"Almost?" asked Mago, suspiciously.

"To activate our robot," Jeremy began again, feigning the tone of voice of someone deeply deranged, "it's necessary to interact with the interface at the hardware level of the physical retro-alimentation codes of the supercomputer, creating a conduit due to a logic process that..."

The boy continued to mix and mash as many of the most esoteric computer science terms that he knew, creating a nonsensical rambling with the unique objective to distract and confound Mago, and when he realised that the terrorist was beginning to get impatient, he decided to shoot straight for the goal. “Ultimately, we will need to have your box – the one that can be used to shut down the supercomputer from a distance.”

Mago burst into a gruff laughter.

“You can forget about that!” he exclaimed. “Do you think I was born yesterday? This box is the only thing letting me keep X.A.N.A. in check, and I don’t have the slightest intention of it leaving my side. If you really need it, build another one like it.”

“We don’t have the necessary pieces,” said Memory.

“Nor the time,” continued Jeremy, who had been expecting such an objection and had even constructed an elaborate plan to persuade him anyway.

“Think carefully,” the boy insisted. “Once we have activated the bot, you’ll no longer need X.A.N.A. You will be the one who decides what to do with Lyoko and the First City. If you want, you could even build an army capable of destroying X.A.N.A. forever. You could obtain a power more absolute than has ever been seen on the face of the Earth!”

Mago closed his eyes. He seemed to be intensely reflecting on his options.

“I could use it to get rid of X.A.N.A.?”

Jeremy nodded, convincingly.

“Exactly, Sir. Without X.A.N.A., there’s no need for the box to shut down the supercomputer. Moreover, if, in the meantime, someone else gets the box, it would become a very powerful weapon...”

A shadowy look entered the eyes of the man.

“And I will have absolute power?”

“You will be capable of intercepting the entire world’s communications, the most secretive and the most encrypted included. You can send the robots created by the castle to anywhere there’s a scanner. You can cut off power lines, disrupt any device from a distance...”

Mago smiled. His golden teeth glistened for a moment in the light at the centre of the tent.

“Then, so be it!” he decreed. “You’ve convinced me, kid. As I’ve always said, to win a lot, you have to risk a lot. But on two conditions... The first is that I’m going with you. I’ll be the one who personally places the box into your little machine. The second is that ten seconds after having given up the command box, I want to see my robot up and running, ready to conquer the world! If not, Grigory will make you deeply regret your imprudence.”

Jeremy nodded. It was twelve minutes to midnight.

The kids were sitting down, pressed up against each other in a large, transparent sphere flying through the sky at an insane speed, like a bubble caught in a whirlwind. Outside of

its curved walls, the landscape of Lyoko passed by in a blur. First, the leafy trees in the gigantic forest, then to the symmetrical and unnatural constructions of the fifth sector between high walls that melted into the sky and immeasurable, dark canyons. They approached the core of Lyoko, and from there, the sphere shot upwards at a high speed until opening up at the bridge that lead to the First City.

The children remained silent, absorbed in their thoughts, and the atmosphere was full of tension. They needed to prepare for battle. X.A.N.A. held his hands out in front of him to drive the sphere of energy throughout the maze that led them to their goal. His blond hair flowed gently in an invisible breeze.

“Guys!” he called.

All his companions turned their gazes toward him. Aelita smiled. It was so wonderful to see him like this, so proud and sure of himself, human. The young girl felt that this was partly thanks to her.

“Now I’ll explain the battle strategy to you.”

Odd was about to interrupt him with a joke, but Eva hushed him by placing a finger on his lips. Even she could tell the importance of the moment.

“We’ll arrive shortly at the First City. It’s a very powerful weapon of the virtual world, and I’ll try to use it to help us in our battle against the Green Phoenix. But there are some things you need to know first. When he invented the castle, Professor Hopper didn’t want anyone to use it for bad pur-

poses. However, even though he was a pacifist and believed in his ideals, he wasn't naïve. He knew that at some point in time, there could be some sort of crisis like the one over the past few days. For this reason, when I was still in the initial phase of being programmed, he introduced certain opcodes to me, security operation codes. And these are the codes that allowed me to create the robot soldiers that attacked Kad-ic..."

"And I imagine you're quite proud of yourself," commented Odd. "We had a real heck of a time destroying those things, you know."

"These are also the codes..." continued X.A.N.A., ignoring him, "that I'm going to use today to transform you into the army of nothing, the virtual squadron of Lyoko."

"The army of...nothing?" asked Aelita.

"That's the name that your father chose for the Lyoko warriors when fighting in the real world. In fact, when you return tonight to the real world through the scanners in the factory, you won't really be there. Your physical bodies will remain safe and sound in the supercomputer. What will come out from the scanners will only be a virtual projection based on you."

Aelita observed her friends. The others didn't understand it either. And even she was having trouble following along with X.A.N.A.'s words.

"You'll practically be in the real world with all your powers from Lyoko and the strength of the castle on your side," the

young man with blond hair explained. “But you won’t really be there. If Mago’s soldiers hurt you, you lose your life points just like in your battles on Lyoko.”

Ulrich raised his hand as if he were in class.

“And what would happen to us if we lost all our life points?” he asked while X.A.N.A. gave him a nod, acknowledging him.

“You’ll reappear in the factory scanners, but you will be in your normal bodies. This is why I’m warning you. From that point on, were that to happen to you, you’d be without protection. And that could be very dangerous.”

Mago, Grigory, Memory and Jeremy took the lift. They were accompanied by two soldiers with enormous hunting knives at their belts, each gripping a pistol with a silencer. The young boy leaned forward to press the button that would take them to the third underground floor, and Grigory took advantage of this brief instant to jab him in the waist with his silver pistol.

“If you dare try anything slick,” he whispered in his ear, “I’ll make you pay dearly. Don’t test me, kid.”

Jeremy trembled. He knew quite well that Grigory wasn’t joking around... But he could no longer back out. It was eleven hours and fifty-one minutes. In just a short amount of time, his friends would leave Lyoko to attack the Green Phoenix. In a sense, their lives were depending on him and

that he would find the courage needed when the time came. Jeremy felt failure wasn't an option.

The doors to the lift opened in front of the large cylinder of the supercomputer. The light from the walls reflected onto the golden symbols on the powered-on machine, and at his feet were Memory's computers, aligned on the ground and connected to the cables that disappeared under the metal plates of the floor.

Jeremy had prepared the space for Mago's box. He had fitted it between two electrical poles that would cause it to short circuit instantly, rendering it unusable. All he had to do was ignore Grigory's pistol and the sinister faces of the soldiers and convince their boss. It was his final effort.

"Good, we're here," exclaimed the leader of the Green Phoenix. "So, when the robot's activated, where do I control it from?"

"Um... From the first underground floor," Jeremy explained to him. "We'll need to take the lift back up."

"Out of the question," said Mago, lowering his head. "I already told you – as soon as I leave the box, I want to have the robot under my control. Otherwise, I don't trust this for a second."

Jeremy was so afraid that he thought his heart might stop. However, when he began to speak again, his voice became more calm.

“I’m sorry, but there’s no other way. Memory and I built it as best as we could... But there was no other way. Either you put in the box or no robot.”

Mago observed him, then gestured to his soldiers, who pointed their guns several centimetres from Jeremy’s eyes.

Inside the barrels of the guns, it was so deep and dark... The boy believed for a moment that he could see the bullets inside, ready to shoot him.

“I don’t have sympathy for anyone who gives me orders,” replied Mago, sharply.

“I’m not giving you an order,” the boy replied. “You’re the one who ordered us to build the bot. And we did... All that’s left is your collaboration.”

Jeremy managed to get a glance at Mago’s watch from the corner of his eye. It was eleven hours and fifty-six minutes. He needed to hurry.

Fortunately, Grigory Nictapolus gave him a hand.

“Sir,” he said, calmly. “You can leave me the box. That way, you can go to the command post on the first floor, and I can keep an eye on the kid.”

That seemed to be a good idea to Mago, and he accepted, although reluctantly.

The head of the Green Phoenix handed over his precious box to Grigory. Then, he made a U-turn and headed into the lift with his two soldiers. The doors shut behind them, and Jeremy heard the motor run, bringing Mago up to the first

floor. The only ones now remaining in the room were Grigory Nictapulus, Memory and himself.

Mago's agent took the box between two fingers.

"And now," he said with a menacing smile. "Let's make some things clear. I don't buy your little game. Why do you want this thing? And why did you stop to look at the time?"

Jeremy opened his eyes wide, and Grigory burst into laughter.

"I also deciphered the message hidden in the news broadcast. Something is going to happen around midnight, right? Or rather, you hope that something will. However, I personally intend to shut down the supercomputer right... now!"

And with the same menacing smile on his face, Grigory Nictapulus pressed the button on the box.

15

THE ARMY OF NOTHING



It flew above the city: an enormous military plane, black as pitch, slicing through the sky propelled by four large helicopter motors that buzzed like a swarm of bees.

At midnight on the dot, the gigantic, metal bird opened its back door, and soldiers began to rain on the old factory.

The men deployed the black wings of their hang-gliders and started to drift in slow, silent circles towards the building, which, from the outside, looked abandoned.

They were just about to land when a muffled groan began to sound from the metal gutters that surrounded the roof's perimeter. Tall flames shone bright in the darkness, rising up into the sky like incandescent claws, filling the air with the terrible smell of petrol.

The commander of the squadron of men in black changed his flight pattern with a tug on the reins, pointing the tip of his hang-glider straight down. He used the microphone he wore on his mouth to alert his companions, but it was a useless warning; the rest of the agents had already escaped the flames.

The Green Phoenix terrorists had surrounded the roof with well-hidden flamethrowers, and landing there was literally impossible.

Some gliders lost the protection of the wind and ended up in the water, where they sank with a low noise.

Others found themselves pushed onto solid ground. After landing, the agents turned to observe the factory, which was so close, and yet at the same time, so very far.

At twenty-one seconds past midnight, from the murky waters of the river emerged a large number of heads. Their faces were covered by scuba masks, leaving behind them long, thin trails of wake.

The frogmen arrived at the river bank on all sides, surrounding the small island. They moved towards their destination, leaving behind the aquatic propellers that had brought them there, now that they no longer needed to swim. After that, an official began to distribute weapons and underwater harpoons between his soldiers.

A small group formed a scouting party that approached the walls of the factory to determine whether it was possible

to climb up it using the climbing equipment they had brought.

The circle of fire that burst from the roof lit up the night, emitting a terrible, high-pitched hiss. The frogmen turned their heads, surprised, and didn't notice that their military boots were pressing against the fine, metal cables stretched several centimetres above the ground.

They heard the alarm sirens begin to sound from within the factory.

A truck arrived in front of the iron bridge that crossed the river, linking the factory on the small island to the mainland. It was a regular military transport vehicle, although it was painted black and its sides were reinforced with metal bars, each one the width of the average adult's hand. On the front bumper was mounted a shovel that resembled a snow-plough, and its metal boarding shone in the darkness as if illuminated from the inside.

At forty-two seconds past midnight, the truck driver extinguished the motor after parking the vehicle right at the mouth of the bridge, so as to block any attempt at escaping through it.

Someone opened the canvas that covered the trailer, revealing a small army of soldiers ready and waiting. They were all dressed in black, and their faces were covered in balaclavas and large night-vision goggles. They began to move silently, unloading several crates from the truck and preparing

to cross the bridge. They then saw the roof of the factory transform into a circle of light, and they heard the high-pitched squeal of alarms. Some dogs they hadn't spotted began to bark and growl furiously.

The explosion immediately after took them by surprise.

The bridge exploded into the air in a confused cloud of molten metal and dense, unbreathable smoke. The soldiers who were closer to the explosion were propelled back by the shockwave and thrown against the truck. The only things that had saved them were the sophisticated, reinforced, bulletproof jackets beneath their uniforms.

The men positioned further back were dazed, watching as the metal bridge bent in on itself, sinking into the water with a hiss as the liquid lapped against the white-hot iron, and it seemed to them that they could never reach the factory.

They quickly seized their radios and contacted the others to warn them of the danger.

At the centre of the First City stood an imposing edifice. It was a massive block of sky blue stone. It was composed of a hexagonal, windowless structure, its roof decorated with gargoyles that resembled dragons about to take flight.

A translucent path lifted into the air near the building, circling around two times to then disappear into the sky, stretching towards the horizon. The path seemed to be made of completely smooth, golden crystal.

There was not a single window on the walls of the castle, and it had a single access point, a drawbridge held up by a pair of large chains, one on each side. Despite its vivid colours, this place had a worrying, malevolent air about it. It was the weapon Hopper had constructed when he was working for Project Carthage, what started it all.

After escaping from the macabre project, the professor had created the First City and Lyoko so that they would serve as immense barriers stopping this weapon from attacking humanity. And the castle was now active once again.

The children stood silent before the drawbridge. None of them were brave enough to enter. Not even Aelita, who, shame etched on her face, had left X.A.N.A. to cross the bridge alone to then disappear into the dark entrance of the structure.

Ulrich jumped from one foot to the other. For once he felt intimidated in his samurai clothing, and he would have loved to embrace Yumi, so as to protect her from this place.

Except that she was more than capable of defending herself. She would have teased him if he had tried.

“What do you think X.A.N.A. is doing in there?” he asked.

“Well, just what he said, no more, no less. He’s creating monsters that we can use to teach the Green Phoenix a lesson!” Eva immediately exclaimed. “And he’s going to transform us into an army of Lyoko warriors!”

“Well I don’t feel calm at all,” Yumi retorted. “In the past, the castle infected X.A.N.A. with a virus that turned him into

a merciless, soulless being. What do we do if that happens again?”

“That won’t happen,” responded Aelita, shaking her head. “X.A.N.A. is different now. I trust him.”

“But even so, there’s still the fact that we’re trying to use a very powerful weapon. A weapon never stops being an instrument used to kill, and I don’t know if we can use it to do good. I mean...”

Ulrich sighed. He had thought about these things, but, as always, Yumi managed to put them into words much better. They needed to destroy the castle, because it could be turned against them, or fall into the wrong hands. What could they do if an army of monsters invaded Paris? The Green Phoenix terrorists could well become the least of their worries.

Aelita also paused to think for a moment.

“I believe that we’re forgetting something important,” she then said. “The castle isn’t just a weapon. My father was the one who built it, remember? And he wouldn’t want us to use it for the wrong reasons. I’m sure that X.A.N.A. will use the castle’s powers to help us.”

“All I hope is that he invents something better than those robot soldiers,” said Odd, who had remained silent until now. “And that he moves a little faster, because I’m pretty sure it’s already midnight.”

That’s when the ground began to tremble.

At first, Ulrich felt it as a trembling in the path, a light vibration that he felt through his wooden samurai sandals.

“What’s happening?” Eva yelled.

“Everything’s collapsing!” cried Odd.

Ulrich saw the golden bridge move on its own, as if shaken by an invisible storm. Along the entire length of the surface began to appear large, serpentine crevasses. The trembling in the ground grew to a staggering shake, and the windows in the building nearest to them exploded, shattering into tiny shards.

The children screamed and threw themselves to the floor.

They heard a different noise to the earthquake, coming from the castle. It was a mix of beating wings and scared yaps. Then they saw the creatures come out over the draw-bridge.

At the front came a Manta Ray of a vivid orange colour with small wings and a very long tail, followed by a mare as white as snow with a long, ruby-coloured horn. Behind them came a panther with a dark coat and enormous sabre teeth, and a silver fox that had to be at least as large as the panther. Finally came X.A.N.A. His face showed a worried expression, and he held in his hand a fuchsia electric guitar that he threw to Eva.

“These will be your transportation...and your weapons,” he explained to them. “But before getting on, take these. They will serve to keep your Lyoko look even in the real world, rendering you invulnerable.”

The young man dug into one of his pockets and took out circular brooches that seemed to be made of hard plastic. On their surfaces was engraved the eye of X.A.N.A.

All around them, the First City seemed on the point of collapse. Ulrich saw a very tall skyscraper wave in the air before crashing to the ground in a cloud of dust, and yet his attention remained centred on the strange animals X.A.N.A. had created for them. In particular, he couldn't take his eyes off the Manta Ray. Its wings were edged with red and the creature flew with elegance and speed. Ulrich thought that it was doubtlessly the fastest of all the beings. To his great surprise, the Manta Ray did a pirouette in the air and descended on him, inviting him to climb onto its rump.

Ulrich looked around. Eva Skinner was straddling the electric guitar, and took off into the air at high speed, like a witch on her broomstick. Aelita was already on the unicorn, and Odd on his panther. Yumi caressed the fur of the gigantic silver fox.

The boy took X.A.N.A.'s brooch and attached it to the back of his kimono, where it remained stuck there as if by magic. He then climbed onto the Manta Ray.

"Can you tell us where the earthquake is coming from?"

"Someone is shutting down the supercomputer," X.A.N.A. responded. "You'll need to hurry to one of the towers, or you'll be stuck here forever!"

Aelita's unicorn was already galloping across the bridge that led to Lyoko. The young elf girl wore X.A.N.A.'s brooch

over her heart, and she held herself with the grace and ease of a trained rider.

“They’re shutting down the computer? What’s going to happen now?”

X.A.N.A. didn’t respond.

Jeremy was paralysed, frozen like a deer in headlights. Grigory was near him, with the box in his hands and his finger already forcefully pressed down on the only button. Few paces away, Memory shivered under her lab coat.

The boy couldn’t take his eyes off the large cylinder. The upper part of the machine was becoming black, and its golden symbols gradually became opaque, eventually dimming completely. Jeremy thought that the supercomputer was a very complex machine, and so it would take some time to shut down completely. But how long? A few minutes, maybe four or five. Either way, it wasn’t long.

Think, Jeremy, think!

Aelita and the others were in Lyoko. At the end of the shutdown process, his friends would remain inert there, imprisoned in an infinite dream, as had happened to the girl years ago...until Jeremy had woken her up again.

Aside from the problem with the terrorists, the children were safe inside Lyoko. But for X.A.N.A., the situation was much more complex. The artificial intelligence had changed too much during the last few days, and Jeremy didn’t know if

he'd had enough time to make a backup copy of his data core. And without that backup copy...

The boy looked at Grigory Nictapolus through his large, round glasses. He grit his teeth, lowered his head and charged at the man.

Grigory immediately passed the gun to the hand holding the box and seized Jeremy with the other.

"What are you trying to do, brat?"

Jeremy didn't respond. He began to kick and punch blindly, but Grigory increased the force he was using to hold the boy and managed to hold him steady. He then bit the terrorist's hand until his jaw hurt, and his adversary threw him against the wall.

As his body impacted, the boy momentarily felt enveloped in a whirlwind of pain. He then realised that Memory had grabbed one of the computers from the floor. The woman raised the laptop above her head and threw it at Grigory, who elbowed it away. This time, Hannibal's agent raised his gun.

"Don't make me do it!" he yelled.

Grigory turned his back to Jeremy, so he couldn't see him. The boy threw himself at the man again, but this time he was trying more to get his attention than injure him. He doubled over just before impact and used his shoulders to knock the back of Grigory's knees. The man fell backward and Jeremy rolled across the floor so as not to be squashed beneath him.

"Memory!" he cried. "Restart the supercomputer!"

The woman didn't hear him, but instead ran towards Gregory, who was lying on the ground, and kicked the hand that held his gun.

Jeremy ran as fast as he could to the supercomputer, found the on/off lever and lowered it.

A spark of electricity burst out.

The children had almost reached the end of the bridge, and before them lay the precipice that led to Lyoko. Behind them, the First City was reduced to rubble. Its buildings fell one after the other, even the smooth surface of the bridge began to be cracked by a large number of small crevasses.

Aelita held onto the mane of her digital unicorn. X.A.N.A. flew along beside her, transported by an invisible force.

"You didn't answer me before," she said. "What will happen when the supercomputer is shut down?"

"I don't know," admitted the young man. "You will be trapped inside Lyoko, and I... There's no backup copy of my new identity. Honestly, I don't even know if it would be possible to make one. I'm much more like a human now, remember? But I don't have a physical body memorised in the factory scanners. I may vanish as if I never existed. I may..."

"I don't want you to vanish," said Aelita.

"So, let's hope your friend Jeremy turns the supercomputer back on in time."

Yumi caught up to them. Her silver wolf ran with large bounds and its sharp teeth were drawn in a menacing snarl in the fury of the race against the clock.

“Sorry to interrupt,” said the girl, “but we’re coming up on the precipice... And I don’t think this fox knows how to fly.”

“Nor my panther or your unicorn!” Odd immediately added.

“Don’t worry,” murmured X.A.N.A. “Just jump. Your creatures will take care of the rest.”

Aelita heard the sound of crystal breaking.

The bridge peeled away behind them. Its scintillating fragments rained into the dimensionless void, vanishing into thin air.

The girl turned to look ahead again and bent down, pressing her head against her unicorn’s.

“Be brave, beautiful,” she whispered in its ear. “I know you can do it.”

She felt a little silly, because this animal was really a digital creature created by X.A.N.A., and possibly couldn’t understand her. But she couldn’t help it; she needed to hear it herself to keep her spirits up.

She gripped the mane tighter between her fingers and planted her knees against the flanks of the strange horse.

The unicorn jumped.

But instead of falling straight down, the creature pressed its hoofs against the wall of the cliff and continued to run

vertically, scraping up small pieces of stone due to the incredible friction.

Ulrich launched in front of Aelita on his Manta Ray and Eva flew along straddling her electric guitar. Behind the girl, Yumi and Odd ran at breakneck speed towards the heart of Lyoko.

“Yahoooooooo!” cried the catboy. “Now this is incredible!”
Aelita smiled.

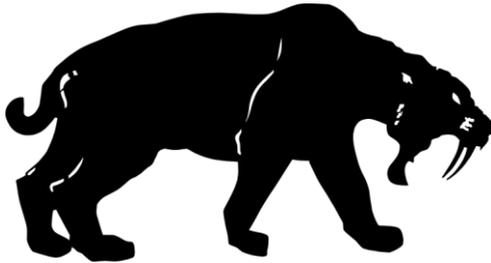
She began to feel calmer. It seemed that the walls of the well were holding out for now, unlike the bridge, it wasn’t giving any hint of breaking. She turned to X.A.N.A.

“Any news?” she asked him.

“It seems as though the shutdown process has been interrupted, but it will be some time before things go back to normal again. Don’t declare victory yet, and let’s hurry to the nearest tower.”

16

SHORT-CIRCUIT



Memory grabbed Grigory's gun and aimed it at his head. Jeremy was in the middle of pulling the lever with both his hands to turn the supercomputer back on, gazing at the scene unravelling before him as if he had been hypnotised. The tower's golden glyphs regained their colour as the young boy hoped he had saved his friends in time.

Grigory gave the woman a cynical smile.

"Just what do you plan on doing?" he said to her. "Shooting me down? That gun is a Desert Eagle. Its recoil is so strong that you'll break your nose... And you don't even know how to hold it correctly."

Jeremy could see that Memory's muscles were tense under the effort of holding such a heavy gun straight.

“Maybe so,” responded the woman. “But I could also hit you by mistake. Drop the box to the supercomputer, get in the lift and leave the room.”

“Out of the question.”

Grigory took a step forward. Jeremy’s gaze fell for a moment to his shoes. They were elegantly made with black varnish and leather soles that squeaked on the metal floor. He and Aelita’s mother, on the other hand, were wearing sneakers with large, rubber soles. And that gave him an idea...

He slipped away behind the supercomputer where he had prepared everything to short-circuit Hannibal Mago’s command box. The box was now in Grigory’s hands, and he had no way of taking it from him... But his system could still prove useful.

Jeremy raised one of the floor panels and removed the safety fuses from the device that he had assembled. The boy’s hands worked at full speed. He had studied these circuits all afternoon and knew them like the back of his hands. The only thing he was missing was a simple, electrical overload.

That way, the supercomputer would disperse the excess energy into the ground, then rid of the faulty circuit and automatically bring things back to their normal state.

Jeremy disconnected one of the alternator’s cables, paying extra attention to touch only the rubber insulation. He had a moment of doubt. Would their rubber soles be enough

to protect them from the current? What would happen to his friends on Lyoko?

With the cable tight between his fingers as if he were gripping a venomous snake, the boy poked his head out from behind the tower. Grigory had gotten a bit closer to Memory, who seemed terrorised. The gun was clearly trembling between her hands.

“Come on, play nice,” said the man. “Give me the gun before you hurt yourself.”

Jeremy made his decision and pressed the cable against the base of the supercomputer. Immediately afterwards, a small cloud of black smoke rose from the device... Then, it sparked.

The metal became illuminated by a bright blue light. Memory gave a small shriek and Grigory fell to the ground like a sack of potatoes.

Jeremy felt the hair on his arms stand up.

“Watch out!” Memory cried out. “Don’t move!”

Grigory’s body spasmed on the ground before falling flat from the discharge, and Jeremy realised that the soles of his shoes had melted from contact with the metal tiles due to the heat. He needed to give them a yank to unstick them.

Less than two seconds more had passed before a series of clicks warned them that the supercomputer had put its security system in place. The tiles instantly regained their natural colour.

“Thanks,” said Memory, turning towards Jeremy, letting the gun fall to the floor.

The boy approached Grigory. The man’s eyes were closed and he no longer seemed too dangerous.

“He’s unconscious. Help me tie him up before he recovers.”

Lone Wolf’s feet were finally out of Richard’s face, allowing him to breathe again.

The ventilation shaft was so low and narrow that the back of his uniform was reduced to shreds, and the smell of sweat from the feet of the men in black agent in front of him had passed by Richard’s nose too many times.

He saw the agent land on the ground with a jump. He had detached the grille at the end of the tunnel and made his way out to look around.

“Is anyone there?” whispered Richard.

“Come on out! The path is clear!”

The young man finally made it to the end of the tunnel, and Lone Wolf helped him out. Then, he turned around to give a hand to Hertz and the others.

Richard looked all around. He was in a large room, full of imposing machines. The enormous hunks of metal were all shut down, and the control panels were covered in large cloaks of dust. Drops of water fell on them from the ceiling and had made the floor smelly and slippery.

“Where are we?” he whispered.

“Under the dining room that we saw earlier,” Professor Hertz replied to him.

Lone Wolf nodded.

“Before beginning the mission, Dido made us learn the entire layout of the factory by heart. We are now in the turbine room, and if we continue this way, we should make it to a service tunnel that will lead us directly to the first floor underground. We’re on the same level.”

Richard observed all the tired faces of the people that were with him. They were all well-armed, but he wasn’t sure that they’d be able to manage.

“What are you planning on doing?” he asked.

“We get to the control room, we eliminate the opposition, and we take control of this place,” Lone Wolf replied with a smile. “We begin to fight!”

Richard gave a long sigh. This was exactly the response he was afraid to hear.

The children had already arrived at the tower. It was in the desert sector, full of golden sand that disappeared beyond the horizon.

Even though it wasn’t hot. On Lyoko, the temperature was always the same. There weren’t seasons. It never rained. It was as if time didn’t pass. And the sand never moved with the wind.

Odd narrowed his eyes to look at Eva in the clear sky, who was turned towards him. The young girl seemed to be some

sort of rock music sorceress, and Odd loved that. Of course, she wasn't really the same Eva that he knew from Kadic... But still, he preferred the real her more with her Yankee accent that altered all her words and made his head spin... a lot.

"Hurry up," the boy cried out without descending from his panther. "We're just missing you!"

Eva nodded and leant forward on the guitar, nose-diving at an insane speed. She pulled up at the last moment, just before crashing into the ground, then finally jumped off the guitar with a cheerful smile.

"Wow!" she exclaimed. "This is the best thing that's ever happened to me!"

But Odd continued to look fixedly at the sky with a worried expression on his face. Large, dark clouds were beginning to form on its once uniform surface.

"What is it?" commented Eva, breaking out in laughter. "Afraid of a storm?"

"There are never storms on Lyoko..." murmured the boy.

He turned towards his friends. All of them were already inside the tower, except for Ulrich, who was waiting for them atop the back of his Manta Ray. He also looked to the sky.

"Uh-oh," he said.

The clouds were gathering right above their heads, becoming darker and more menacing. Then lightning began to clash.

The first bolt reached the tower, making it shimmer in a million sparks. The second fell right by the feet of Odd's pan-

ther, leaving a dark crater on the terrain. The boy leapt to the side thanks to the agility of his animal.

“I don’t understand! What the heck is Jeremy doing? First, they shut down the supercomputer... And now this!”

“The important thing,” Ulrich answered, “is that we get materialised as soon as possible.”

Eva nodded.

“He’s totally right. Let’s head back to the tower. X.A.N.A.’s waiting for us.”

The second underground floor in the factory was being guarded by six soldiers sat in a circle beside the scanners. Three of them were European and discussing the scores to the most recent football games. The others were Asian and quietly speaking about *buzkashi*, a violent game from their native land similar to polo, except instead of competing to get a ball, they compete over the *buz*, a goat carcass without a head or limbs.

The soldiers were very bored. They had been there for hours, without moving, in front of these scanners, without even having a simple television set to watch. There hadn’t been the usual shift change, so they were forced to skip dinner.

“I don’t get it,” exclaimed one of them, getting to his feet. “Why is no-one coming? Our shift already ended a while ago!”

Another, who had been speaking in Mongolian up until now, immediately switched to French.

“Try to stay calm. You know how things work when we’re given a mission...”

Suddenly, a whirring sound could be heard, and the soldier turned towards the scanners. He aimed his sub-machine gun in the same direction.

“What’s going on?” he murmured. The man had worked for Green Phoenix for years. He had fought in Asia, Africa and Latin America. At this point in his life, he was convinced he’d seen everything. But he wasn’t prepared for this show...

Sat atop his panther, Odd was the first to exit the scanners.

“YEAAAAAAAAHHHH!” he cried triumphantly.

X.A.N.A.’s plan had worked. Thanks to the pendant, he had been materialised in the real world in his feline form... And on the back of a panther!

The boy noticed the presence of the soldiers. One of them was on his feet and pointing his gun in his direction.

“Laser arrows!” cried Odd while firing a barrage of small blades of light from his fists at the man.

The soldier began firing bullets that flew very close above Odd’s head, ricocheting off the walls of the room. After that, the laser arrows hit their target, throwing him into the wall. Arrows had bolted his uniform to the wall, and the barrel of the gun was cut in half.

The man uttered something in an unknown language, but Odd wasn't paying attention to him. The panther jumped against one of the walls of the room and turned around, while the boy began to fire another barrage of arrows.

He saw that Ulrich had come out of the second column and Yumi from the third. The young samurai had already unsheathed his sword and was about to confront one of the soldiers as Yumi opened her fans.

"There's only six!" protested Odd. "Leave them to me!"

With his Lyoko powers, he felt capable of taking on an entire army. Ulrich hopped off his Manta Ray, slashed apart the guns of two soldiers and took them down in several kung-fu moves.

"Yumi and I will take care of the guys over here, then we'll head to the entrance of the factory! Go with Eva and Aelita to the first underground floor and take over the command post."

Aelita then came out from the scanner on her unicorn at full gallop. The creature lowered its horn, forcing one of the soldiers to the ground, and Yumi immediately attacked him.

"Roger that!" said Odd, seeing that Eva was also exiting the scanner. "Come with me. We must reconquer the super-computer!"

Deep within the turbine room was a half-rusted, iron panel. Richard was remaining there to keep watch while Lone Wolf, Weasel and Ferret were picking the lock closing off the passageway and trying to push the metal cover off.

Behind the panel was a vertical tunnel. It was a sort of dark and humid, thick, cement channel, just over a metre and a half in diameter, that went on further than the eye could see, descending down towards the second and third floors underneath the factory.

Just in front of them, on the opposite wall of the channel, was a closed door. It was the entrance to the control room where the command post was for the supercomputer.

The only thing left to do to reach the door was to jump without thinking too much of the size of the tunnel. They needed to latch onto one of the supports on the other side to climb up and finally open the iron panel.

“It’s starting to really smell,” commented Walter Stern. “We won’t be able to all enter at the same time.”

“No,” confirmed Lone Wolf. “One of us will need to get to the other side and open the door. The others will stay here to cover them in case the terrorists are waiting for us.”

Hertz and Lone Wolf discussed a plan of attack for a moment, while Richard and Michel Belpois went to search for necessary materials.

They found a coil of electric cables under a large panel. It was thick enough to support the weight of an adult man. They returned to the entrance of the tunnel, struggling with the weight of the coil, and helped Weasel attach himself to the cable around the waist.

Then, the agent suspended nearly his entire body above the abyss of the well and jumped towards the other side. The

cable moved behind him like the tail of a distraught animal. Weasel reached out his arms and missed the first support by a hair, but immediately managed to grab hold of a lower one.

He turned towards Richard with a big smile on his face.

“Perfect!” he said, trying to catch his breath. “I’ll climb as quickly as I can.”

The agent climbed up to the door that connected the turbine room to the supercomputer’s controls. Lone Wolf observed him with his gun ready. By his side was Professor Hertz, and behind him, Richard and Walter Stern. The Ishiyamas and Michel Belpois, who were also armed, were waiting to the side of the others. The agent brought a hand towards the lever to open the door, but it moved before he could touch it. The metal panel slid to the side, revealing a narrow passageway from which a gun immediately opened fire.

Lone Wolf and Hertz immediately threw themselves to the ground. Richard lowered his head so that a barrage of bullets flew above his shoulders, creating a tonne of sparks against the gigantic turbine behind him.

Two seconds later, the young man managed to reopen his eyes. The command room was so close. Richard saw the seat pivoting and the semi-transparent, coloured globe that was floating in front. Lyoko.

But the room was full of soldiers, and all of them were armed and ready to fight with all their might. At their lead was a man elegantly dressed in yellow from head to toe.

“Hannibal Mago!” growled Lone Wolf.

The agent leaned in towards the inside of the maintenance well, gave two blind shots towards the room, then took cover again.

Meanwhile, Weasel was still in the channel, holding on tight with his body flat against the wall like a gecko in camouflage. Suddenly, the agent cried out, losing his grip on the supports, and began to fall down the abyss. Richard pulled the electric cable that was attached to the agent. The young boy felt adrenaline coursing through him. He felt like he couldn't think clearly. All around him set off a storm of shouting and bullets.

He tried to stay calm. Weasel weighed too much for him, and his arms weren't strong enough to pull him up. He let the cable slide slowly through his hands, descending bit by bit. After all, the tunnel must end sooner or later, and down below, Weasel would be safe from the bullets.

When Richard finally felt the cable relax, he brought his hands his mouth and called out, “Hey, man, did you make it?”

“Yes, yes! There's also a door down here, but it's shut and needs a numerical security code!”

A new barrage of bullets forced Richard to take cover behind the wall. If something didn't happen fast, they wouldn't have the slightest chance.

Hannibal Mago was furious. Something must have happened on the third floor. He had sat for several minutes at the command post, but no robot had appeared to obey his orders. That damned brat, Jeremy, tried to play him for a fool!

And now he had another conundrum. The prisoners were free and had somehow managed to arm themselves. It was too bad they found themselves on the other side of the well, however. From there, they were nothing more than simple human targets.

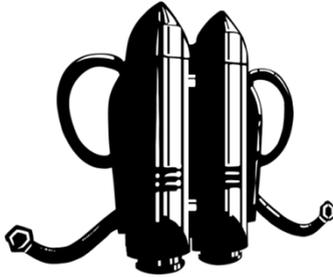
Hannibal Mago saw one of his soldiers fall back, hit in the arm by a projectile. He took a weapon in his hands, an AK-47, took a step towards the tunnel and unloaded it on his adversaries. Then, he stood petrified. What the hell was he doing? The priority was to keep himself safe. His men would take care of the intruders!

He made a U-turn towards the lift and saw the door slide open to the side. The man smiled, expecting to see the rough face of Grigory Nictapulus... But instead, there were three strangely-dressed kids. One was riding a panther, the other was atop a unicorn, and the third was on an electric guitar. The three soared into the room and attacked the soldiers.

Mago threw himself to the ground and run on all fours as the brats dove from one side of the room to the next with the fury of an entire army. It was time to run for the hills.

17

MAGO'S ESCAPE



In slow motion, Odd saw the soldier behind him lift his weapon, and in the midst of all the confusion he seemed to hear the click of the trigger.

There was a deafening explosion and the boy closed his eyes, gripping the short, gleaming coat of the panther with all his might. The creature jumped, carrying him up high, and for a moment he couldn't tell which way was up.

When he reopened his eyes he realised that he was still in one piece. The soldier was splayed out on the floor beneath the claws of the digital panther, complaining in a foreign language.

"Ye-heeeeah!" Odd cried, his shout becoming a crazed, wild laugh.

The boy quickly analysed the situation. Aelita and Eva were doing superbly. The unicorn galloped between the soldiers, throwing them to the ground with violent kicks while its elf rider threw energy fields. Eva shouted tirelessly, creating a shower of sharp notes in all colours that battered the Green Phoenix men. Some of them had already dropped their weapons and fled.

Odd turned just in time to see the lift door close. In the cabin was a man dressed in yellow.

“Hannibal Mago is escaping!” someone yelled.

The boy turned in the direction of the voice. The person who had called out was Professor Hertz, who was on the other side of the narrow opening. Odd scrutinised the door. It wasn't very large, but...

He made a decision. He dug his heels into the panther's flanks and lay down along its spine, his face pressed against its soft fur, trying to stay as low down as possible. The creature immediately understood his intentions and crossed the room at a dizzying speed while Mago's soldiers leapt out of the way so as not to be barrellled over. The panther leaned over the opening, angled its head, stuck its paws out in front and jumped.

It flew across the metre-and-a-half-wide, vertical tunnel and landed on the other side, between the turbines.

Odd greeted the Ishiyamas. Then he saw Richard and his face lit up.

“Would you happen to know if we can go down from here?”

“Y-y-yes...” Richard babbled, a distraught expression on his face. “We came through the ventilation shafts, but I mean, there are stairs...”

“Perfect!” exclaimed Odd. “In that case, hop on.”

“But...where?”

“Well, on the panther’s back, of course. We’re going to give Mago what’s coming to him, once and for all!”

Ulrich and Yumi approached each other and took one another’s hand. Then they smiled and embraced.

“You did great,” said Ulrich, his gaze drawn to the girl’s deep, dark eyes.

“I’d say that we both did amazingly,” she responded with a smile.

And indeed they had. All the soldiers in the scanner room had been neutralised. They were now all in a corner, tied up in pairs. Each soldier carried a pair of handcuffs on their belt, and they had proven very useful...for the children.

Ulrich’s Manta Ray was on the floor, and now seemed like a large, orange rug. The silver fox was beside it, its head between its paws.

“So what do we do now?” Yumi asked.

Ulrich shrugged and thought about it for a moment.

“Let’s go to the factory ground floor and finish the job!”

The lift was in use. The children pressed the call button and waited impatiently for the door to open. When the container finally brought them up with the low sound of the creaking of cables and the door opened, they were greeted by a very real war zone.

There were dozens and dozens of soldiers shooting at one another, hiding behind piles of metal beams or taking cover behind trolleys of equipment and enormous bobbins of cables. Some of them were dressed in the Green Phoenix's green uniform, and others wore neoprene wetsuits and large, bulletproof vests of the same colour.

Yumi let out slow breath, stupefied.

“Let's join the battle!” encouraged Ulrich.

The little samurai jumped onto his Manta Ray and drew his katana.

A throwing knife as sharp as a razor blade hurtled towards Ulrich and the boy sliced right through its middle with a perfectly-calculated, two-handed swing of his sword. He then plunged headfirst into the mêlée of bodies, shouts and bullets.

Dido and Principal Delmas were in the science laboratory.

The woman, who wore a pair of large headphones that hid her ears, kept her eyes riveted on her computer monitors.

By her side, Delmas silently observed everything, seated on a chair far too small for his stature. The principal was

afraid. Dido knew this and she, too, was afraid, but there was no going back.

The clock on the wall in front of them showed that it was eighteen minutes past midnight. The image on the main monitor trembled for a moment, to then draw the lines that made up Maggie's face.

"So?" said Dido tautly after letting out a sigh.

"We've received the preliminary report from aerial squadron 1 and infantry squadron 3. Unfortunately, there's no good news. Someone blew up the bridge between the bank and the island, and the Green Phoenix's defensive weapons prevented our delta-planes from landing on the factory roof. These two teams are now isolated outside."

Dido let out yet another deep sigh. Thanks to the headphones, Principal Delmas hadn't heard a single word, but he must have figured out something after seeing her expression. The woman had her hands on her knees, tense like claws, crumpling her pants, and the veins in her forearms were beginning to swell.

"And squadron 2?" she asked, not without fear.

"The frogmen made it to the objective. Unfortunately, the sides of the island were covered in alarms that alerted the terrorists. We lost contact with them, but thanks to squadron 3's reports we know that a gunfight took place inside the building."

"Tell squadron 3 that they need to get to the Hermitage. I want that house terrorist-free as soon as possible!"

Dido opened a window on the screen. It was the image of a fighter-bomber, an F-16 with no distinctive markings and triangular wings loaded with missiles. Black Raven.

“At what level are we in the other operation?” Dido asked.

“Black Raven left our secret base in Ireland on time. It will reach the objective at the set time.”

“Good,” commented Dido. She paused a moment to think before continuing. “I want peer-to-peer radio communication to be in contact with the pilot. I’ll be the only person who can communicate with him.”

The secretary nodded.

“I sincerely hope that Black Raven will return to base with all its cargo, Madam.”

“Yes, Maggie, I hope so too.”

Odd and Richard left the staircase behind them and arrived in the machine room that Mago’s soldiers had turned into a lunchroom. When the panther burst into the room, all the men leapt to their feet and brandished their weapons.

Odd spurred his creature. It bounded and galloped towards the row of tables with a terrifying roar. Richard responded with a small, scared whimper.

It was Odd’s favourite style: a classy, grand entrance.

The boy stood up on the back of the panther as it ran and readied himself. While Richard continued his insane race across the tables, he grabbed onto a tube coming out of the ceiling and, using it like a gymnastic bar, he spun around,

shooting laser arrows left and right. He aimed with great precision, destroying weapons, disarming the soldiers and sending throwing knives flying as they hurtled into the room like a deadly swarm. He then let himself fall, landed on the back of a soldier and knocked him upside-down, ran across a table and continued to shoot arrows low to the ground.

He was having the time of his life.

Yumi had already figured out how things worked: the soldiers in green were the bad guys, and the ones in black were good. When she and Ulrich arrived, the ones in black were losing the battle. There were few of them, while the Green Phoenix soldiers were like the heads of the Lernaean Hydra.

However, the two children had already shifted the balance of forces on the battlefield. It was like they were everywhere at once. Ulrich appeared in the middle of the confrontation on his Manta Ray, spinning his sword around like a helicopter rotor, while Yumi's silver fox flashed here and there throughout the room, dancing between shadows and stacks of beams to then attack the terrorists by surprise.

The girl spotted the thin, metal columns holding up the framework of the footbridge glisten as it caught the light. Her fans cut through the air, slicing straight through the columns as if they were made of butter before returning to her hands. The Green Phoenix soldiers huddled together under the platform raised their heads, distracted by a groaning sound from above, and saw as the footbridge fell on top of them.

“Nice shot!” called a voice.

Yumi turned around and smiled. Odd and Richard had entered through a door. The older boy was lying on the back of the large panther, which seemed to be out of control, while Odd followed them in long jumps, pushing himself off any surface, be they horizontal or vertical. He looked like a real cat.

“Watch out for the guy dressed in yellow!” he immediately shouted. “It’s Hannibal Mago!”

Yumi turned in the direction Odd was pointing, and a number of the men in black did the same, to immediately open fire.

The girl saw the boss of the Green Phoenix who, hurling all sorts of colourful curses and insults, pulled out a large, silver gun from his vest to return fire at his enemies. He then hid behind a column to reload his weapon. When he came out from behind his refuge, for a fraction of a second, the man and the girl’s eyes met. Mago then fired six times in a row.

Yumi’s fox bounded to the side so that the girl wouldn’t be hit by the bullets...but they hit it right in the chest.

“No!” Yumi cried.

Beneath her, the fox transformed into a shining cascade that dissolved in the air like cinders. The geisha rolled to the floor.

A new volley of shots forced her to jump to one side, to safety. Odd arrived beside her and ducked behind a trolley that lay on its side.

Yumi gave the man an icy stare.

“Mago will pay for that. Let’s go get him.”

Ulrich fought with incredible ardour. The Manta Ray fired lasers from its tail while the boy used his martial arts skills to attack using his sword, dodge, and kick his enemies. Richard wasn’t doing too badly, either...especially thanks to the panther.

“Ulrich!” Yumi called. “Odd and I will take care of Mago.”

The boy jumped from the Manta Ray in a circular kick that sent two soldiers to the floor. He turned and raised two fingers as a sign of victory.

“Ok. The situation’s already under control here.”

Yumi smiled. She and Odd then exchanged glances and both leapt from behind the trolley.

The boss of the Green Phoenix had hoisted himself up onto one of the footbridges that was still intact, and was running madly for the doors leading to the offices. Odd took a running jump that landed him directly on the footbridge, bouncing off it as if his legs were springs. Yumi also did a spin in the air, grabbed onto a beam hanging from an old crane and used it like a pendulum to join her friend.

“Where’d he go?” she asked Odd once she’d reached his side.

"This way."

Beneath them the battle became more intense. The two children ran along the footbridge and forced open the door Mago had shut behind him seconds earlier.

They were in a room full of gloomy-looking machines. It wasn't a very big space, although the ceiling was very high up. There was a framework of staircases that led from the room to one higher up, the last floor before arriving on the roof.

"He could be hiding anywhere..." whispered Odd, but his sentence was interrupted by the sound of another door closing with a *clack*. The two children raced up the stairs, preparing themselves for combat.

Another new room with yet more machinery. This time, the ceiling was a large glass expanse that looked extravagant that way the light of the moon shone through it.

Hannibal Mago, clearly visible thanks to his ridiculous canary yellow suit, was climbing along an enormous press. The boss of the Green Phoenix seemed to know this place like the back of his hand. Once he was on top of the machine, massive and covered in grey dust, he stretched up to the glass ceiling and broke one of the panes with the butt of his gun.

"Stop!" Yumi shouted.

She threw her two fans but the man was quicker than her, and after heaving himself up, he made it up onto the roof, disappearing from view.

Yumi got her fans back. She and Odd ran to the press Mago had climbed up and remained on their guard in case of gunfire. But the only thing that came to them from the factory roof was deep silence.

The two children jumped, found the hole the man had smashed in the glass and followed him.

They now found themselves on the roof of the factory. It was a sloping terrain made of metal and glass that led to the outer gutters, painted an intense grey like mercury by the moonlight. It was very cold up there and the wind blew so hard it threatened to knock Yumi off balance, slipping on the smooth soles of her wooden geisha sandals.

Hannibal Mago was moving along the slope of the roof towards a small platform of red bricks a little lower down. On the platform, there was a case, a metal container on which the symbol of the Green Phoenix had been emblazoned.

The man heard the noise the children made behind him and turned his head to look at them while continuing to move forward, slipping and flailing his hands like a large, scared spider.

Odd made a step onto a pane of glass, causing it to make a sinister creaking sound, before quickly retreating back onto the iron supports.

“Watch where you’re going,” Yumi said. “This thing could break at any moment.”

The girl removed her sandals and began to walk in bare feet, following her friend. There was too much wind for her to

use her fans and Mago was too far away for Odd's arrows. They continued on in silence, putting one foot in front of the other, arms spread wide to keep their balance, like a couple of tightrope walkers.

Mago moved in a disorderly fashion. He lost his nerve. He still held his gun in one hand, and the weapon bothered him. He placed one foot on a pane of cracked glass, which broke in two beneath his weight. Yumi heard a curse and saw the man get back to safety on the iron framework.

Mago turned towards them again, noticed the technique the children were using, and he too began to walk on a large, imaginary rope, one slow step after the other.

Odd shot several arrows, but they hit the crystalline surface without reaching their target. Meanwhile, the boss of the Green Phoenix made it to the brick platform, ducked behind the case and returned fire.

Yumi heard the gunshot, turned around and saw Odd fall backwards. The shot... It wasn't possible, Mago had managed to hit him! The catboy became enveloped in a dense cloud of blue sparks and disappeared.

The girl fixed her gaze on the boss of the Green Phoenix, glaring with complete loathing. She knew that Odd would just appear back in one of the factory scanners, completely unharmed, but she couldn't stop thinking about what would have happened to her friend had he not possessed his Lyoko powers.

She growled. Mago threw his gun to the side and busied himself opening the case. From it he took a strange metal backpack with large tubes on the lower part. He frantically donned the device, threading his arms through the stiff braces, which he then attached to his upper thighs, and seized a rectangular object that was connected to a side of the backpack by a cable. It seemed just like a video game controller.

Mago pressed a button, and the metal backpack lit up with a low noise, to then spit out dense flames from its lower tubes.

Finally Yumi understood what it was: a jetpack. She had seen them in films but she had never thought that something like that could truly exist!

The boss of the Green Phoenix pressed another button, and with a *crack*, from behind his shoulders opened two small wings. He then flew up a few metres. The jet from his propulsion units made the glass part of the roof around him explode into tiny pieces.

Hannibal Mago was going to escape without even a scratch!

Yumi breathed deeply and began to run on the thin metal beam. She then did a cartwheel with more style than a professional gymnast, and landed on the brick platform. The girl, who was now right behind the man, jumped up and threw her fans. But Mago had noticed her manoeuvre and spun around, making a tight turn in the air. The fans missed their target and quickly returned to Yumi.

The terrorist boss pressed the buttons on the box in his hands and propelled himself backwards. From his throat came a mad laugh, like he was cawing in triumph.

“See you never, brat!”

For a split second, Yumi saw the light reflect off his golden canine teeth, and then the man turned back around and began to fly off the factory roof and towards the river, gaining speed.

He was escaping and Yumi could no longer stop him.

But as soon as he arrived at the gutters, Hannibal Mago heard the sound of fire erupting, accompanied by the disgusting stench of petrol. He had forgotten the flamethrowers he had installed to prevent possible aerial attacks.

The boss of the Green Phoenix let out a cry. He quickly manipulated the jetpack controls, and the backpack zoomed upwards just as one of the jets of fire gushed out beneath his feet. He instinctively raised his hands to protect his face. This would prove to be a huge mistake.

At first, Yumi didn't understand what was happening. She saw the man hurriedly change direction to climb up into the sky while the factory roof burst alight beneath him, creating a compact wall of fire.

Then, all of a sudden, triggered by the dense smoke that rose from the lower part of his jetpack, Mago started to spin around and around at high speed.

The boss of the Green Phoenix flew far above the wall of flames and off into the sky, drawing behind him a trail of light like a comet.

The flamethrowers extinguished with the same speed they had lit, and in the darkness that flooded the night, Yumi saw Hannibal Mago lose altitude and arc into the silent river, sending up a great splash of water.

18

BLACK RAVEN



At Kadic Academy, Dido was watching the time. It was twenty-six minutes past midnight.

The boss of the men in black opened the radio connection with the pilot of the fighter-bomber in good time.

“Madam,” said a cold, masculine voice. “I will have more than completed the objective within three minutes and fifty seconds.”

Dido felt that this was the most difficult decision that she has ever had to make in her whole career. She was about ready to give the order to attack. She trembled, but she needed to stop the terrorists at any cost. But she felt that the words were now refusing to form in her mouth.

“Get ready to destroy the factory,” she managed to mutter at last.

Grigory Nictapolus had regained consciousness, but he found himself shoved up in a corner, tied up and gagged. His clothes reeked of smoke. The man was pale and had an expression typical of someone who had had a bad day.

Jeremy smiled wide at Weasel. The boy had noticed that someone in the maintenance shaft was trying to figure out how to get inside, so he immediately opened the door, freeing the agent, and the man was now aiming his weapon at Grigory Nictapolus. An expression of satisfaction could be seen on his face.

Jeremy felt relieved as well. He had traced the movements of his friends thanks to the laptops that were still connected to the supercomputer.

In reality though, it was X.A.N.A. who deserved the thanks for picking up on his presence in the real world and regularly sending detailed files his way at each crucial moment.

He had already described how Aelita and Eva had saved Professor Hertz and the other adults, and how Ulrich and Richard had taken down the majority of the soldiers, and finally, how Yumi and Odd had confronted Mago.

The boy turned towards Memory.

“Why aren’t we heading to the ground floor of the factory?” he said. “That’s where all the others are...including Aelita.”

The woman gave a timid smile.

“Well, it’s just that...I don’t know if I’m ready. I mean I’m dying to see her... But she won’t even remember me. She might think that I abandoned her! Maybe she hates me.”

Jeremy sighed. Why must adults always be so complicated?

“Aelita doesn’t know you. It’s true. But she’s done everything she can to find you, and now, she probably feels all alone. You need to run and go see her, hug her and get to know her...”

The boy was interrupted by the computer at his feet as it began to emit an insistent alarm. Jeremy saw X.A.N.A.’s face on the screen. He was still in the tower on Lyoko and had a sombre expression.

“Did something happen?” Jeremy asked him.

X.A.N.A. nodded his head.

“When you electrified the ground to stun Grigory, the Internet connection to the factory was lost, and we’ve been isolated.”

Jeremy nodded. He’d known about that...but he’d figured it wasn’t an urgent issue. It was more important for them to have taken out the Green Phoenix agent.

“The connection came back for a brief moment,” the young man with blond hair continued. “Just long enough for me to intercept a communication from Dido. Actually, I think you were totally correct.”

“About what?” asked Jeremy with a worried tone of voice.

“About the government having a plan B in case they weren’t able to stop the terrorists. I think that a plane is preparing to blow up the factory.”

“Whaaat?!” cried Jeremy. “And when are they going to attack?”

“If my calculations are correct, in two minutes, more or less. Unfortunately, we lost the Internet again, and it would take hours for me to re-establish the connection. You need to find another way to get us in contact with Dido ASAP.”

Aelita was sitting at the centre of the ground floor of the factory on the remains of what had once been the emerald green, nomadic tent of Hannibal Mago. The factory was full of activity. The men in black were tending to the injured, giving them first aid, handcuffing the rest of Mago’s soldiers and deploying men who were still in condition to work to do something useful.

She was with the people she loved: Yumi, Ulrich, Eva and Odd, who had earlier come back out from the scanners, now without his powers.

None of them spoke a single word. They didn’t feel like it was the right time yet to speak of their adventures. Now was the time to take in the battlefield, breathe deeply and enjoy the feeling of their freedom and accomplishments. Everything was perfect. Or rather, it would have been perfect if the last person they were missing was there: Jeremy.

Aelita wanted to see him again, hold him in her arms, and tell him how grateful she was for everything that he did. Of course, Jeremy's style was kind of reserved and serious, almost secretive. But without him, the kids wouldn't have been able to materialise into the real world and then...what happened could have been terrible.

When the doors to the elevator opened, Aelita turned towards it with a large smile.

She remained frozen in place. Jeremy wasn't alone. With him was another agent from the men in black, Weasel, and a woman with red hair who...

Jeremy told me that she was here, the young girl thought to herself with heartache. *But up until now, I was reluctant to believe it...*

Aelita was about to step in their direction when Jeremy began to yell out, "A radio! Someone give me a radio! QUICK!!"

"Forty-three seconds until we reach the objective, ma'am," sounded the static-riddled voice of the pilot in Dido's ears. "Is authorisation to open fire granted?"

On Dido's screen in front of her was a small, black dial showing the countdown.

Forty. Thirty-nine.

"I must release the bomb," continued the pilot. "Or else I'll need to make a large turn to return to the factory for another shot."

Dido felt the pressure of the moment and knew that the same concern as hers was behind the pilot's stoic voice. But she was the one who had to support the weight of this decision.

"Ok," she murmured. "Prepare yourself. Authorisation for attack at X hour granted."

"Roger."

At the same moment, Maggie's face appeared on her screen above the pilot's. The secretary seemed stressed, almost distraught.

"Ma'am, stop Black Raven! They succeeded! The children succeeded!"

Dido couldn't believe her ears. There were only twenty-one seconds remaining before the attack.

At only eighteen seconds left, she reopened her connection with the pilot. As she spoke with him, her heart was beating so strongly that she couldn't even hear her own voice.

Jeremy placed the radio on the ground, one the leader of the frogmen had given him.

"I did it," he spoke softly.

Ulrich gave him an affectionate punch to the shoulder. Everything that had just happened once the boy had arrived back on scene had been a complete surprise to them, and they didn't understand an iota of what had just taken place.

"Mind explaining, genius?"

Jeremy gave a timid smile to his father and fixed his glasses on the bridge of his nose.

“Right, well...I managed to tell Dido to abort the attack. There was a plane that was about to bomb the factory.”

“What...?” blurted Odd, jumping to his feet. “A...?”

“Plane,” Lone Wolf completed his sentence for him. “Operation Black Raven. I should have guessed that Dido would see herself obligated to put it in action.”

Jeremy raised a finger towards the ceiling.

“Do you hear that? That’s the noise of the fighter-bomber that was about to disintegrate all of us.”

Odd broke out into applause.

“Bravo!” he cried. “For Jeremy: hip hip...!”

“Hooray!”

Aelita was watching the scene unfold from the corner of her eye. She felt it must be something important, however, she wasn’t able to concentrate. The woman who had come out from the lift with Jeremy hadn’t left her eyes. The cascade of red hair that went down to her shoulders and seemed to shine of its own light was the same colour of her own in the real world when she wasn’t in her elf form on Lyoko.

The woman had the same eyes as her. And the same fine lips that Aelita saw when she looked in the mirror every morning. The nose, however, was different, as well as the shape of her face. The woman’s face was softer and more friendly.

Aelita wanted to approach the woman, ask her if it was true – if it was really her. Yet, despite it all, she found herself unable to move or even to smile. It was as if an invisible storm was roaring inside of her, causing her to be frozen in place.

A small, beating knot that Aelita felt in her chest knew perfectly well why she wasn't able to speak. This small, painful knot was telling her, *Don't get your hopes up. Don't kid yourself.*

She had already experienced it before. She had woken up in the supercomputer after a decade of sleep, and found herself all alone. So all alone that she could no longer even remember having parents.

She then discovered that her father was still alive, trapped on Lyoko in the form of a sphere of energy. But Aelita was only able to spend a few minutes with him before he sacrificed himself to neutralise X.A.N.A. back when the creature was still lacking human emotions.

She later recovered the video in the Hermitage on which her father revealed to her that her mother was still alive and that Aelita needed to find her. He had given her the necklace. And again...

Things had been that way for such a long way: struggling, believing, wishing and then seeing all her hopes dashed, blown apart like a castle of cards destroyed by a gust of wind. She couldn't do it anymore. Aelita had had enough of suffer-

ing. She was no longer able to take the first step. She was afraid. Even if Jeremy had said that it was her...

She felt her head turn. Around her, the world no longer existed. There was no factory, no men in black, no terrorists. Only herself and the woman with red hair.

Very slowly, she saw her bring a hand to her neck, pull out a golden chain from under her shirt and hold it between her fingers.

At this same instant in time, Aelita's necklace began to vibrate. Without completely understanding yet, without wanting to believe it yet, the young girl raised the necklace to her eyes. The *A* and the sailor's knot were shining intensely.

The pink-haired woman nodded her head slowly.

Aelita realised that she couldn't see clearly. Her eyes were full of tears.

The woman took a step forward. The small knot in Aelita's chest melted like an ice cube under the sun, and the young girl opened her arms wide and began to run. Sobbing, she threw herself in the woman's arms.

She felt great. She felt at home. This was her mother.

19

CODE DOWN



Jeremy understood. Aelita and her mother needed some time alone. They had twenty years to catch up on. Now that they'd found each other again, there was no more room for anyone else. It was as if an invisible firewall was isolating them from the rest of the world.

The boy shrugged. He was dying to be able to talk to his friend, but he would have to wait. And, either way, he had plenty of other things on his plate.

Jeremy began to debate with Lone Wolf and the leader of the frogmen. They needed to find the necessary material for building a makeshift bridge that would reconnect the factory to the mainland. They needed to drain the river to find Mago. Dido was about to arrive with the rest of her agents, who dur-

ing this time had apprehended the terrorists at the Hermitage.

There were some seriously injured men among the men in black as well as the Green Phoenix soldiers, and they needed to be taken to hospital as soon as possible. And there were other injured that could be taken care of immediately, through handing out bandages and disinfectant.

The children watched the scene from a distance. Besides Odd, the others were still Lyoko Warriors, and with them were the creatures X.A.N.A. had created. They felt out of place. What's more, the large, black panther had seemed to become affectionate of Richard, and its gigantic head was resting against the young man's shoulder.

Jeremy smiled.

“What are you waiting for? We haven't finished yet, and your powers could be useful. Ulrich, Eva, you two can fly, so you help transport the steel cables to the riverbank to construct the new bridge. Yumi, to complete the bridge we'll need some of the gangways the Green Phoenix installed here, and your fans are perfect for cutting the columns holding them up. Odd, we'll need medical supplies. You and Richard can take the panther and find some faster. Search the factory from top to bottom.”

The children stood at attention and imitated a military salute before getting to work.

Jeremy turned around to see the stupefied looks Lone Wold and the leader of the frogmen were giving. He smiled, somewhat embarrassed.

“Well,” he said, “you have your team, and I have mine.”

At four o'clock in the morning, a long stream of black limousines appeared at the end of the road and stopped in front of the new iron bridge.

They were welcomed by Lone Wolf, Professor Hertz and Jeremy. The boy was exhausted, but he knew that he couldn't get even a wink of sleep tonight. He needed to hold on a little longer.

The first limousine's engine stopped, and the driver got out to open the passenger door. An energetic-looking adult woman with short, blonde hair got out. In her hand she held a small suitcase, handcuffed to her wrist.

Lone Wolf stood at attention, while Hertz stayed motionless. Dido nodded towards them, then approached Jeremy.

“You must be the young Belpois,” she exclaimed. “Thank you for warning me in time.”

The boy tried to reply, but the woman had already turned to her agent.

“I think it's time to have a private meeting,” she declared. “I want a detailed report on everything that happened tonight, and I've prepared some instructions.”

“Yes, Ma'am.”

“I also want to be part of this little conversation,” Hertz cut in. “I’m not certain about what you have in mind, Dido.”

The boss of the men in black shot the professor a stony look.

“Sorry. From now on, this mission is under the jurisdiction of the men in black...and you deserted them years ago.”

Lone Wolf gave a satisfied smile.

“Come with me, Ma’am. I’ve prepared a room for our meeting.”

Jeremy tried to protest, but Dido and the secret agent had already crossed the temporary bridge. Hertz firmly gripped the boy’s shoulder, and gave him a sad smile.

“Let it go,” she said quietly. “Unfortunately, she’s right. We’ve played our part, but now it’s their turn.”

“What do you think Dido will decide to do?”

The professor didn’t respond, but deep worry glistened in her eyes. Jeremy hoped that Odd had followed his instructions carefully.

Odd was furious. In the span of just two days he had been forced to probe through the sewers in a wetsuit, take part in an assault on the Hermitage, hide in the Mirror, transfer himself from there to Lyoko and then attack the factory to vanquish the Green Phoenix once and for all. Everything was over now. They had won. He was a hero, and that means that he deserved applause and praise...and a little alone time with Eva, right?

Wrong!

Jeremy, who had done nothing but research on his computer this whole time, had suddenly started acting like the leader: *Odd, do this, do that... Odd, get into the air ducts and get to the room where Dido will meet with the adults...*

The air duct was very narrow and humid, and full of dust. The pieces of metal it was composed of were stuck together using rusty screws that scratched against his skin. He could only see a metre ahead of him.

Why the heck had he accepted?

Well, in part, he felt flattered to have been chosen for this difficult mission. Aside from Jeremy, he was the only one who didn't have his Lyoko powers, and so he could slip in and out of places without being noticed... But, even without his powers, Odd was incredibly agile, and he knew how to be silent when he needed to.

But there was one other reason why he had been pushed to say yes. Although nobody had ever said it out loud, the whole gang knew that Jeremy was the boss. Not because he was superior to them, but because he had great instincts and the ability to resolve truly exceptional problems. In time, Odd had learned to unconditionally trust his friend. If Jeremy says it's important, then it's really important.

The vent formed a ninety-degree angle in front of him. The boy peered around the corner, then crawled towards the light at the end. He froze as he heard the sound of chairs moving around on the floor and some small coughs. A moment later,

he continued towards the small grate at the end of the conduit.

He saw the factory director's office, sparsely furnished with two chairs either side of an enormous desk. Lone Wolf waited standing up, while Dido was seated. She used a small key to unlock the handcuffs attaching the suitcase to her wrist. Then, she opened it and took out a pair of gloves. They were made of leather, and had a screen on the black of the right glove, with a series of coloured cables connected from it to the fingertips.

Odd had already seen this device. It was the memory-snatching machine invented by Professor Hopper! The same machine that had been used on his father to permanently erase all trace of their memories of the supercomputer.

"This operation was classified Code Red *Tabula Rasa*."

Odd repeated Dido's words in his head so he could relay them to Jeremy. *Tabula Rasa*? What could that mean?

"What priority?" said Lone Wolf, opening his eyes wide.

"Absolute. That includes myself as well. Before coming here I erased the memories of the agents in the Hermitage, the teachers and all the students and parents who were at Kadic during the recent events. Total elimination of everything that has happened these past few days. Now it's the factory's turn. Once I've taken care of all the people here, I'll communicate the results to Headquarters and use the machine on myself."

“And this way, nobody will know anything about the supercomputer’s existence anymore...except the government bigwigs, of course,” the agent concluded.

“Exactly,” Dido confirmed.

Lone Wolf seemed perplexed.

“And what will happen after that?”

“A new squadron has begun to search for Mago. A team of scientists will then be chosen to study the supercomputer and find a way to adapt the First City. This way, the agency can use Hopper’s weapon for its own means.”

“But we won’t remember anything.”

Dido shrugged.

“The operation was moved to higher circles. The bosses don’t want to run any risk. There have already been enough problems.”

Lone Wolf stood and took the memory-snatching gloves his boss held out to him.

“Who do I start with?” he asked.

“The terrorists first. Then all our agents, and the children and their parents afterwards. And finally, you and I. I’ve already called in a clean-up team. They’ll arrive in a few hours, and escort us back home. Mago’s men will end up in prison, and to us, absolutely nothing would have happened...”

“But the clean-up team...”

“They’ll be in charge of cleaning up the factory without knowing what went on here. The secret will be kept.”

Lone Wolf gave a weak smile.

“Ma’am, given that I won’t remember anything soon, I want to tell you that it’s been a real honour participating in this operation under your command.”

“Thank you, Lone Wolf.”

The meeting ended. Odd retreated into the conduit. He couldn’t believe his ears: the men in black were planning to erase everyone’s memory! Even theirs! He had to warn Jeremy immediately.

“I can’t leave my mother!” Aelita whined.

She was beginning to get very annoyed with Jeremy. After all, after so many adventures and misadventures, she had finally been able to hold her in her arms again. She had a family once more, and she had kept the promise she made to her father. How dare the boy now come and ask her to...?

“Haven’t you got your priorities straight?” he retorted. “If we wait a little longer, it’ll be too late.”

“I said it’s out of the question.”

Jeremy sighed. Aelita saw the worry etched on her friend’s face, but she wasn’t about to let him do it.

“Ok,” he finally gave in, whispering. “Ask Memory...I mean Anthea, to come with us. But do it softly and quietly. So nobody sees you.”

The men in black were grouping up all the survivors of the great battle and escorting them to the cafeteria. At that moment, nobody was paying attention to the small group of kids.

Jeremy approached Aelita's splendid unicorn.

"We can't bring you with us," he murmured, "but we're going to need your help."

He whispered some instructions into the unicorn's ear, and then repeated them to Ulrich's Manta Ray and Odd's panther.

The creatures galloped off to create chaos among the adults, who were obeying the men in black's orders without question. Taking advantage of the distraction, Anthea and the children ran to the lift, and headed underground.

Aelita was impatient, and all the others seemed nervous. They had heard Odd's hurried explanations about Dido's terrifying plan: erase all their memories, send scientists to take advantage of Hopper's supercomputer for military means...

The only one who appeared calm was Jeremy. Worried and a little sad, but calm.

"Can you tell us exactly what you have in mind?" Aelita burst out.

"Seriously, jus trust me. I'll tell you when the moment arrives."

The children went down to the second floor, the scanner room. Then, Jeremy, Anthea, Richard and Odd went back up a floor.

Aelita observed the columns, somewhat dubious.

"You'll see, Jeremy must have a plan," Yumi reassured her.

A few moments later, they heard their friend's voice over the speakers around the room.

"Sorry if I've been overly mysterious," Jeremy explained, "but we really don't have much time. I've just cut the cables to the lift, so the men in black can't reach us here... For now, at least. I don't know what you think about it, guys, but I haven't the slightest intention of forgetting about our all adventures."

"Of course not!" Richard's voice crackled. "It was the most beautiful and incredible thing that's ever happened to me!"

"Plus," continued Jeremy, "it's not right for Anthea to have to lose her memory. She and Aelita have just found each other again. And it's not right that the supercomputer falls into the hands of the men in black. Professor Hopper fought as hard as he could to ensure that wouldn't happen."

"So, what do you propose we do?" asked Yumi.

"Before anything else, you need to come back to the real world. And attacking each other until you lose all your life points doesn't seem like the best solution..."

"Darn right it's not!" Odd immediately exclaimed over the speakers. "It really hurts, believe me."

Jeremy gave a little laugh.

"You just need to enter the scanners, and you'll rematerialise in the real world. Aelita, you need to go in last, please."

The children stayed still for a few seconds, then Ulrich smiled.

“It would be pretty useful for my father to forget everything,” he said. “We may have made up over these past few days...but I don’t feel comfortable with his secret agent role. If he can’t remember all these adventures, with a little luck, he and I can start from scratch.”

“I’m thinking the same thing about my family,” Odd added. “I really hope that my parents won’t remember anything. If not, they’ll choke me to death worrying about everything I’ve done or am doing!”

The scanners opened, and Ulrich, Yumi and Eva entered at the same time. Moments later, they came back out again completely transformed. No more swords, fans or exaggerated rock star make-up. They were just three children in jeans with eyes droopy from fatigue.

“Aelita,” Jeremy said over the speakers, “now it’s your turn. X.A.N.A. is waiting for you.”

The girl entered the scanner.

When she opened her eyes again, Aelita found that she was in a tower on Lyoko. Its dark walls seemed to rattle around her, and by her side was the blond-haired teen.

“Why...why did you bring me here?” Aelita murmured.

In her ear, she heard Jeremy clear his throat.

“Well, you see, I wanted to tell you, but...”

“I think I’m the one who should explain everything to her,” X.A.N.A. finished for him. “After all, it concerns me. Do you remember the Code Down?”

Aelita nodded before replying.

“It’s my father’s security program. If the Code Down is loaded in the supercomputer and I activate it from a tower like this one, Lyoko will autodestruct definitively, and you...”

“I’ll die. It’s impossible to create a backup copy of my new personality, so I’ll simply cease to exist.”

Aelita looked at X.A.N.A. She didn’t understand. This conversation was giving her chills. She just wanted to be happy! She had just found her mother, and was about to start a new life with her. So why are X.A.N.A. and Jeremy intent on scaring her like this?

“I made a promise. Do you remember?” she cried. “I swore that I would never activate the Code Down.”

Her words shook in the silence of the tower. The girl felt X.A.N.A.’s eyes stare at her fixedly.

Now she began to understand. And with understanding rose a cry of rage so loud it made Jeremy feel nauseous.

“Jeremy!” she yelled. “What does all this mean? Just what are you planning on doing?”

The boy took several minutes before responding.

“X.A.N.A. and I have talked about it, and it’s our only option. If the supercomputer falls into the hands of the men in black, they’ll use it as a weapon. The First City will become what your father always loathed. We can’t let that happen.”

“Jeremy is right,” X.A.N.A. confirmed. “He created me to stop humans from using the City as a weapon. I don’t know how I managed to forget such an important task, but now I

know that I must fulfil my purpose. Save humanity. And I need you in order to do it.”

Aelita fell to her knees. She didn't want to listen to this. She didn't want to cry. She raised her gaze to meet X.A.N.A.'s. Her eyes were full of indignation.

“Don't ask me to do such a thing. Not you, not Jeremy. I won't activate the Code Down. I won't destroy Lyoko. And I won't kill you either.”

“Aelita...”

“I said *no!*!”

“Aelita, it's what your father would have wanted,” said Jeremy.

X.A.N.A. smiled.

“He sacrificed himself to save humanity from Lyoko. Now it's my turn to make the same sacrifice.”

Aelita didn't reply. A screen appeared in front of her, floating above the ground.

Jeremy, Anthea, Richard and Odd held on tight as they climbed down the maintenance tunnel to the second underground floor. They entered the room just as the scanner doors opened to bring Aelita back to Earth.

The girl's head was hanging low. She wasn't dressed as an elf, and her short hair was the same fire-red colour as her mother's.

She raised a hand to gesture for Yumi to not come any closer, as the girl had approached to try and console her. She

took long strides towards Jeremy. The boy was waiting with his hands in his pant pockets. He didn't know what to say. He felt guilty.

He had brought Aelita back to the real world an instant before Lyoko had imploded on itself, vanishing into nothing.

The supercomputer was still turned on, but it no longer held any virtual worlds, or even an operating system. Its immense calculating power had become useless, patiently awaiting something that would never come back.

As the complex program was bringing Aelita back to her physical body, Jeremy had seen the dying scream from the collapsing tower. X.A.N.A. had motionlessly awaited his destiny. Until he had suddenly raised his head. Jeremy was dumbfounded to see small, shining diamonds flow from his eyes.

They were tears. X.A.N.A. was crying.

Jeremy opened his arms to welcome Aelita home, and the girl threw her head over his shoulder, sobbing.

"Do you know what he said before I left?" she whispered in a broken voice. "He said, '*Remember me*'."

Jeremy gave a weak smile.

"That's what you have to do. What we all have to do."

The Code Down had destroyed Lyoko. X.A.N.A. was no more. Now it was really the end.

Dido put on the gloves of the memory-snatching machine. Her face resembled a stone mask.

She and Jeremy were in the director's office at the factory, seated at opposite ends of the desk. On the table, the small suitcase was still open.

A hallowing silence reigned throughout the factory. All the people involved in the terrible affair had lost their memories, and were staring blankly at the ceiling. Everyone except Dido, Jeremy and his friends.

The boy knew that the woman could force him to have his memories eliminated. She could also force it on Anthea, Richard and the others. He had to change her mind.

"So," said Dido, "you've shut down the supercomputer."

"Not exactly," Jeremy replied. "All we've really done is erase all the data it contained. The computer is now nothing more than an empty, useless carcass."

"Lyoko no longer exists."

"Correct."

"Nor do the First City and X.A.N.A."

"Correct."

Jeremy tried to read the woman's expression, notice the slightest sign of rage or a sad smile. But there was nothing; Dido seemed completely unreadable.

"And why did you do it?" she asked.

"Why did I ask Aelita to use the Code Down? It's simple: it's what Hopper would have wanted us to do. The professor spent his whole life fighting to keep the supercomputer out of your hands, as well as the terrorists'. From his point of view, there's no difference between the two of you."

“That’s not...”

Jeremy didn’t let her continue.

“Don’t you understand, Ma’am? You all want to use the supercomputer as a weapon. Mago wanted to conquer the world, and your agency probably intended to use the robot soldiers for ‘legitimate’ means in ‘official’ wars, but what difference is there? In both cases, innocent people end up dying. And Hopper would never have allowed that.”

Dido sighed, and this time Jeremy could see a shadow of fatigue on her face.

“I imagine there’s no way to undo what you’ve done...”

“Absolutely none. And if you don’t trust me on that, you can send the Code Down to your scientists. The program is definitive, and can’t be undone.”

“So you’ve left me with no alternative.”

“More or less. But we’re sure we’ve made the right decision,” as he said these words, Jeremy gave the boss of the men in black a look of defiance.

“And there’s something else,” he added. “None of us want to lose our memories. This is our great adventure, and Anthea...well, I think she’s suffered enough these past decades, don’t you? It’s not right to take away her memories of her husband with the stroke of a pen, or the ones of when she finally held her daughter in her arms again.”

With a calm gesture, Dido placed the memory-snatching gloves in the suitcase.

“The clean-up team will arrive in a few minutes,” she said softly. “They’re agents trained to resolve complicated situations like this one. They’ve been ordered to erase my memory, given that I must be the only person to keep even the slightest memory of these events. And then they’ll take care of everything else. They’ll erase all trace of the terrorists and take them to prison. They’ll accompany your parents to their respective homes, and you and your friends to the school. And finally they’ll close up the factory, blocking the access road with a wall, resolving the sewer flood and all the rest. It will be as if these past few days had never happened.”

Jeremy lowered his head.

“They’ll keep you under surveillance for some time,” Dido continued. “The memory-snatching machine has some side-effects...confusion, dead stares, speaking nonsense and other things of the sort.”

The boy looked at the woman, not understanding what she was getting at.

“I know, but...”

“So, try your best to act that way, and don’t let yourselves be noticed,” she interrupted. “When the clean-up team arrives, pretend you’re all a little disoriented, let them guide you to Kadic like sheep and try to not stand out among the adults. And, of course, don’t get involved in any more dodgy dealings! I won’t remember your faces, so I can’t help you even if I want to. Ok?”

Jeremy couldn't believe his ears. When he had come into the office, he hadn't any hope of convincing Dido.

"Why are you doing all this?" he asked the woman.

"To be honest, I don't at all like what's about to happen. Tonight I was forced to make the most difficult decision of my life, and I realised that it had been the wrong decision. When everything turned out well thanks to you and your friends, I let out a sigh of relief... To then realise that it was for nothing. Of course, we're not the Green Phoenix, but either way you're right: in the end, the ends we would use the supercomputer for wouldn't be all that different to theirs." As she spoke this last sentence, Dido offered him her hand. "Consider it a gift from a friend, alright?"

Jeremy shook the hand with enthusiasm.

"Alright!" he said. "And to celebrate our friendship, I have one last favour to ask of you..."

The clean-up team arrived at around seven o'clock in the morning in a large, black truck. They wore plastic suits, gloves and shoe covers, like forensic scientists. Masks covered their noses and mouths, and large, reflective glasses hid the rest of their faces.

They didn't speak. Not even to each other.

Jeremy and the other kids sat in a corner, trying to look a little stunned. Now and then, Odd couldn't help himself, and burst out laughing. That may have been precisely what made their little game of pretend look so convincing.

Jeremy stared at Dido as one of the agents took the memory-snatching machine and used it on her. For several minutes, the small digital screen on the back of the gloves filled with fast-scrolling text, while the woman bent backwards as if a strong electrical charge was rushing through her body. Her final glance was at Jeremy, and the boy swore he could see a smile on her lips.

After that, Dido ended up like the others, somewhat disoriented and confused. They led her into a van with Lone Wolf, Weasel, Ferret and the rest of the men in black. The terrorists were handcuffed and piled into a truck to be brought to the police station.

Then it was the children's parents' turn, who boarded a helicopter to be taken to their respective homes.

Professor Hertz, Richard, Anthea, Jeremy and all the others got into a minibus that took them to Kadic.

The clean-up agents were rather scary. They all looked the same, and were very quiet, but they knew how to do their job. In a short amount of time they had disposed of Mago's nomadic tent and the terrorists' gunpowder. They even worked on the factory bridge to leave it looking exactly as it had before the explosion, in such a way that the inhabitants of this part of Paris wouldn't notice the difference.

Jeremy thought that, in a few days, this place would be identical to as it had been for so many years.

All trace of their adventures was destined to be completely erased.

And maybe that was for the best.

Finally, one of the agents started the minibus and set off towards Kadic.

Jeremy turned to take one last look at the factory on the small island, with its roof flooded with sunlight and the mysterious air about it that had always fascinated him. The river water flowed peacefully, and on the other side of the river he could see the same traffic as always, full of beeping cars and motorbikes ducking in and out dangerously between other vehicles.

Jeremy had all his friends by his side.

Everything was perfect.

EPILOGUE

A PARTY WITH A SURPRISE

It was ten in the morning on Sunday, and the airport in this region of Paris was filled with people.

There were tired tourists lugging around big suitcases behind them and businessmen moving with ease and determination past the counters, policemen and departure gates. There were pilots and flight attendants in their impeccable uniforms with small, professional-looking, wheeled suitcases. As well as throngs of students and chauffeurs holding up small signs with all sorts of names written on them to catch the attention of a client arriving from who-knows-where.

Odd was also holding up a small sign, one that read, *EVA SKINNER*.

By his side were Principal Delmas and Jim Morales, the physical education teacher.

Suddenly, Jim extended an arm towards the screens that indicated the arrivals and departures of the flights.

“There it is!” he exclaimed. “The flight from San Francisco just landed.”

Odd couldn't contain his joy. It had been more than twenty days since he had last seen Eva, and it had felt like a real eternity.

Dido had erased the memories of the principal, teachers and all the students of Kadic. They had woken up with headaches and a bit of confusion after what seemed to them to have been a long dream.

The men in black had done a good job. They had left the school like new, and the mess caused by the Green Phoenix had all simply vanished.

The following day, two agents from Interpol came to the principal's office. Eva's parents had gone to the police after she had run away. For over a month now, the young girl's face had been among the thousands of photos of missing persons at police stations around the world.

The Interpol agents calmed the principal down, promising him that no complaints would be filed against him (complaints, of course, that the principal would not be able to answer given that he didn't even remember that a student named Eva Skinner was registered at Kadic).

This was the promise that Jeremy had obtained from Dido before the woman wiped everyone's memories. And she had kept her word. Someone had spoken with Mister Skinner,

who was a renowned lawyer, and convinced him to withdraw his complaint. At first, Mister Skinner was furious and called Principal Delmas on the phone in a fit of rage, but then he chose to accept the men in black's offer: a scholarship for Eva to attend Kadic Academy, paid in full by the government.

Mister Skinner thought it was a rather good idea ultimately. Eva seemed so happy when he finally saw her again!

"I'm still not very convinced about all this," spouted principal Delmas. "This Skinner seems like a very aggressive man to me... His phone call woke me up at three in the morning, and he was shouting at the top of his lungs!"

Odd turned and gave a smile that crossed his face from ear to ear.

"Don't worry, sir, everything's already been arranged, right? The police closed the investigation, and Eva's parents are happy that she's registered at Kadic. They said European schools are much more chic!"

Odd then interrupted himself and began to jump on the spot, "Look, look, there she is!"

The sliding doors that led to the baggage claim opened up, and the passengers from the San Francisco flight started to pass by them.

Eva was pulling a small, wheeled suitcase and was dressed in a light pink jacket that made her seem several years older. When she saw Odd, she waved her hand and ran towards him with her suitcase bouncing behind her.

“I’m so glad to see you!” she exclaimed in English while hugging him tight.

“Um, me too...” muttered Odd in French. “Whatever it is you said.”

“Idiot! I know you understood me just fine!”

Eva gave him a kiss on the cheek, took him by the hand, then gave a small nod to Jim and Principal Delmas.

“Sir, my father gave me a letter for you to apologise for having been so rude. I’m sure you understand that with me having been missing for such a long time, my parents began to feel really desperate...”

Odd stopped listening to the conversation and focused on Eva’s delicate fingers, interlaced with his own. All throughout his career of breaking hearts, the boy had managed to get a good number of girlfriends, but in general, it didn’t take a long time before he would get bored. However, during all these days that he’d spent far from Eva, he hadn’t stopped thinking about her for a second. And he felt like his chest was about to explode of joy. Eva was here, and she was here to stay.

“You know what?” he whispered in her ear. “We already prepared your room in the dorms. It’s the same one that Aelita once had now that she’s living at the Hermitage with her mum.”

He gave a small laugh before continuing, “At first, it’s a bit of a mess, because we need to go to bed early and respect a tonne of rules. But I know all the ways around them!”

“What’s that?” the gym teacher burst out. “You better watch it, kid, or you’ll end up in detention for so long, you won’t get out until your hair goes grey!”

Eva laughed, and Odd followed her. Then, Jim and Principal Delmas also broke out in laughter.

Ulrich knocked timidly on the door to Professor Hertz’s office with the back of his hand.

“Enter!” a masculine voice answered him from inside.

The boy entered. The office was in its usual organised disarray with machines, books, beakers and microscopes placed all over the room, the floor included. Nearby the main table was a smaller one, a bit smaller, on which sat a laptop and a pile of neatly-ordered papers. Behind the screen was Richard, who was working in total concentration. He was sitting on an unsteady pile of magazines and wearing thin-framed glasses that gave him a different air than usual – more adult-like and more serious.

Upon seeing Ulrich, he stood and moved away from the computer, “Ah, it’s you. Good... I wanted to speak with you actually.”

He motioned to invite him to sit, but the boy couldn’t tell where, so he gathered several volumes of encyclopaedias from the floor and piled them up so that he could sit on top.

Ulrich stumbled. He didn’t know where to start, but Richard cut him to the chase and began to talk at full speed.

“I corrected your last science test, and I must say that things aren’t going well. On the second question, you made a small mistake that I almost had to mark off, but then on the third...”

Oh no, Richard wanted to talk about school! Ulrich waved his hands to stop him.

“Whoa, whoa! I know that you’re Hertz’s assistant now and that you’re taking your new job very seriously, but...it’s Sunday!”

The boy’s interruption caught him by surprise, and Richard stopped to look at his watch.

“Um... True, it is Sunday,” he muttered. “I forgot. This is all still new to me and juggling work with university isn’t an easy thing...”

Ulrich felt himself smile. Professor Hertz hadn’t forgotten a thing of what had happened recently, but she discovered a certain affinity for Richard, and several days after the battle for the factory, she offered him a job as her assistant.

At first, he was a bit nervous, but he finally accepted. Ulrich knew that he felt right at ease at Kadic, and that in time, he would make a great teacher.

“I came here as your friend, not your student,” said the boy. “I wanted to invite you to dinner.”

“To dinner? You? But...”

Ulrich gave a small laugh.

“It’s Anthea who told me to come! She and Aelita want to organise a dinner this evening to celebrate.”

Richard nodded his head.

“A party? Tonight? Perfect. I’ll bring the wine, ok? And, um, also some drinks for you guys. What time is it?”

“At eight o’ clock at the Hermitage!” exclaimed Ulrich as he left through the door.

“Hello, it’s Yumi.”

“Hello, Yumi!” responded the calm voice of Anthea from the other side of the line. “How are you?”

“Alright... Can I speak with Aelita, please?”

“I’m sorry, dear, but she’s taking a short nap. She’s very tired.”

Yumi glanced at the clock by her bedside. It was six o’ clock in the afternoon. She was asleep at this hour? Yumi considered for a moment telling Aelita’s mother about her problem, but realised that she couldn’t. That would be too embarrassing!

The young girl thanked Anthea and bade her goodbye. Then, she stayed in place, playing with the wireless phone.

There were only two more hours to go until the dinner, and she couldn’t speak to Aelita. Now that she thought about it, she and Jeremy hadn’t been around all weekend. Yumi hadn’t managed to find them anywhere... And she didn’t know who to ask for help.

Eva maybe?

Yeah, right... Yumi rejected this idea immediately. She had just returned to Kadic this morning, and Odd had her

glued to him from the first instant. What's more, she was a major fashion victim, and instead of helping her, Eva would have broken out in laughter.

The truth was that Yumi didn't have the slightest idea how to dress. Ulrich would come looking for her at a quarter to eight to go to the party. For Yumi, this would be a really special occasion. After the battle against the terrorists, she and Ulrich hadn't yet had the occasion to talk about their feelings for each other. Yumi felt as if something about her had changed – something that was becoming stronger.

In the minibus that had brought them to Kadac, leaving the abandoned factory forever behind them, the boy had sat by her side and held her hand. He had become more sure of himself, more bold...

What should she wear? She wanted Ulrich to realise that she had made herself pretty for their get-together. Maybe she needed to put on some make-up... But she didn't even know where to start.

At that moment, she heard a knocking at her door, and her mother entered immediately afterward, with bare feet and a cup of steaming hot tea in her hand. The tea smelled like jasmine – Yumi's favourite.

"Is everything alright?" Akiko asked her.

Yumi gave her a smile. Her parents didn't remember anything that had happened over these past few days, but something had stayed with them, like a sort of well of emotions. The family had become more united, and there was more

harmony at home. Yumi and Hiroki, her younger brother, had stopped fighting, and her mother seemed to be much more sympathetic.

Yumi had spoken with Ulrich and the others, and they all had had the same impression. The memory-snatching device had erased all the bad things and left the good.

“Well,” sighed the young girl. “I don’t know how to dress elegantly for tonight. I mean, I’d look good in the *kimono* from that my aunt gave me for Christmas, but I don’t want to look...”

Akiko kneeled on the floor close to her and placed a hand on her shoulder, interrupting her.

“It’s for Ulrich, right?”

“Yes...”

“Can I ask how you two met?”

Yumi began to tell her. She told her mother about the afternoon in the gymnasium when she and Ulrich had faced each other in a martial arts bout and how she ended up battling him. Akiko laughed.

“So, this boy fell in love with you, because he realised how you’re good at what you do. If you ask me, you don’t need an elegant *kimono* to get his attention. What really interests him is how you are on the inside.”

“But...”

“But if you want, I could give you a hand with your hair. We’ll keep it Yumi style, but give it a more special touch.”

Yumi smiled. She and Akiko stood and hugged.

The guests arrived around eight o' clock. First, Eva, Richard and Odd, who was carrying his little dog, Kiwi, in his arms, then Ulrich and Yumi.

Jeremy went to open the door for them and realised that Ulrich was a bit grumpy.

“What happened?” he asked as he passed by the group.

“Well, nothing really,” his friend spoke softly. “Just that I didn't notice Yumi's 'beautiful' new hairpins that she had in her hair, and...she gave me a good punch.”

Jeremy laughed. Yumi and Ulrich, always the same.

In the middle of the Hermitage's living room was a long table with a charming tablecloth and a bunch of delicious food. Odd stared at it with the eyes of a hungry wolf.

“It won't be easy to do justice to all of this food!” he exclaimed.

Eva replied with a nudge, “But if you make it to my pork, you'll swallow every last bit!”

Aelita descended down the stairs wearing a sweater and an elegant, pink skirt. She still had sleepy eyes, but she was smiling and seemed to be doing extremely well, radiant with happiness.

“Finally!” Yumi greeted her. “I was looking for you everywhere this afternoon, you know that?”

“And I was looking for you, Jeremy!” added Odd.

“Mind telling us what you two were up to all weekend?”

The boy responded with a mysterious smile and pulled out a chair for Aelita, so that she could sit by his side. It was quite a perfect dinner.

Anthea came out from the kitchen glowing with joy.

“I have to admit that, despite the fact that I've recovered my memory, my wonderful recipes never returned to me... So, I ordered everything from an amazing restaurant nearby. I hope you all like it!”

The children applauded.

Indeed, everything was delicious. They stuffed themselves, and Richard and Odd competed to see who could eat the most slices of roast beef. The competition ended in wild cheers, and the indisputable victory went to Odd for having eaten nine slices against seven. Before moving on to dessert, the children decided to take a break and remain seated at the table, talking. A bit later, as expected, the conversation centred on their adventures, particularly on their battle against Mago and the Code Down.

“What I regret the most,” Ulrich said, “is that X.A.N.A. isn't here with us. I mean... At first, I didn't like him at all with his air of superiority and all that. Plus, he had been our enemy for a long time. But in the end, I realised that he had really changed, and he proved to us that he was a good person.”

“I think the same thing,” continued Odd. “When we were all running along the bridge to Lyoko, and I was on my super cool panther, X.A.N.A. approached me and gave me some

advice for the battle ahead... And you won't believe it, but we even laughed! Even though Lyoko was falling to pieces then, because Grigory had just shut down the supercomputer..."

"Yeah," confirmed Yumi. "I thought that after the Code Down I would miss Lyoko a lot, because of all these adventures that we went on. And yet, Lyoko doesn't matter to me in the least. What I really miss is X.A.N.A., our friend."

At that moment, Jeremy stood and rang his fork against a glass to call for silence. He and Aelita had been waiting for this moment all evening, and the time had finally arrived to share their news with everyone.

"Tell me something," exclaimed the boy. "Haven't you been wondering what the codes that we found in Richard's palm-computer contained?"

In the living room of the Hermitage, a large uproar took over. Everyone began to talk at the same time.

A mischievous smile grew on Jeremy's face, and he let Anthea explain the first part of the mystery.

"Hannibal Mago ordered me to study them, and while analysing them, I understood that it was a program divided into two parts. The first was an activation code... And the second was completely incomprehensible! It was clear to me that this program's purpose was to activate something, but I had no clue as to what!"

Jeremy continued, "Later on, Anthea and I worked together on deciphering the codes, and I realised that she was completely right. The last part of the codes didn't seem to

make any sense, as if it was only a tonne of random letters and numbers. So, I told myself that maybe it was just that. It seemed like one very, very, very long password.”

“A password?” asked Richard. “But why? To protect what?”

“I don’t know if you remember this one scene that we saw in the Mirror,” Aelita intervened this time. “But in it, my father had problems making a backup copy and needed more space to stock an excessive quantity of information. An amount of space that no hard drive was capable of supplying him.”

Yumi jumped to her feet.

“Of course!” she exclaimed. “And so, you told him that you would help him and that he could count on you... And in the next scene, you were lying down on the couch and had a fever, and then the men in black arrived...”

“Exactly,” said Aelita. “Daddy needed more space, so he and I decided to use my brain.”

The room was overtaken by absolute silence.

Jeremy smiled.

“Remember the memory-snatching device? Well, Hopper used it to pour all the Supercomputer’s programming code into Aelita’s mind. He practically copied all of Lyoko into Aelita’s brain. And, to avoid having this information stolen by anyone, he protected it with a password that he then sent to Richard.”

“That’s why I was burning up with a fever in the Mirror,” explained Aelita. “And also why I spent all afternoon sleeping today. I left yesterday with Jeremy in secret, and we returned to the old factory...to recreate Lyoko. All of it, all of its sectors, its towers and its core. And even the First City!”

It was incredible news. Jeremy observed the bewildered faces of his friends.

He had also had trouble believing that such a thing were possible...to be able to reconstruct Lyoko with a code identical and opposed to that of the Code Down. That was the reason why Aelita had always suffered from sudden spells of amnesia. Her brain was literally crammed full of millions and millions of pieces of data – just like an armoire stuffed so full that it was impossible to close all the way!

When Jeremy had realised that Richard’s codes were in reality a password, he imagined that Hopper must have prepared a security system to protect his invention from the men in black, but he hadn’t the slightest idea that the professor had in reality copied every last bit of Lyoko, enclosing and locking it away in Aelita. Everything went so fast after that with the battle and all the rest that he hadn’t gotten back to this puzzle until...

“And X.A.N.A.?” asked Ulrich.

“That’s right, that’s right, X.A.N.A.!” Odd added. “He told us that he couldn’t make a backup copy of his new identity, because he became human.”

“X.A.N.A. would say that’s true. But the final words that he spoke to Aelita before dying gave me an ingenious idea.”

“He said, ‘*Remember me*’. Maybe X.A.N.A. knew all about the codes, or maybe he sensed the truth. Or maybe he was trying to guess at it and found the solution to this mystery by chance. ‘*Remember me*’. Besides having all of Lyoko in her memory, Aelita was also X.A.N.A.’s best friend. You could say that no one knew better than her, especially with his new human personality.”

At this moment, Aelita smiled and Jeremy stopped for a second to look at her lovingly before continuing.

“When we recreated Lyoko, we only needed to take advantage of all the information in the rest of her brain to...”

The boy was on the point of launching himself into a scientific exposé of the highest level, but Aelita motioned for him to stop.

“I think that it would be easier to show them directly, don’t you think? Come with me to the basement, to my father’s secret room. We have another guest on the way to eat dessert with us. He has blond hair and has been stuck on Lyoko for a very, very long time. He must be about to come out of the scanner.”

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**X.A.N.A.
AWAITED HIS DESTINY WITHOUT
MOVING. HE SUDDENLY RAISED HIS HEAD
AND JEREMY SAW SHINY DROPS BEAD IN
THE CORNERS OF HIS EYES.
TEARS. X.A.N.A. CRIED.**

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A VAPORE

