

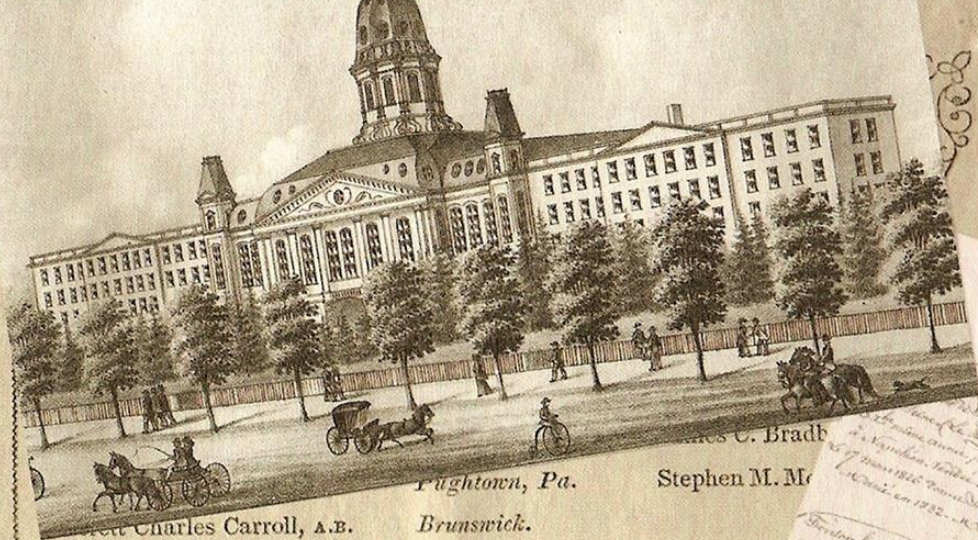
JEREMY BELPOIS

CODE LYOKO



THE
NAMELESS
CITY

ALBIN MICHEL



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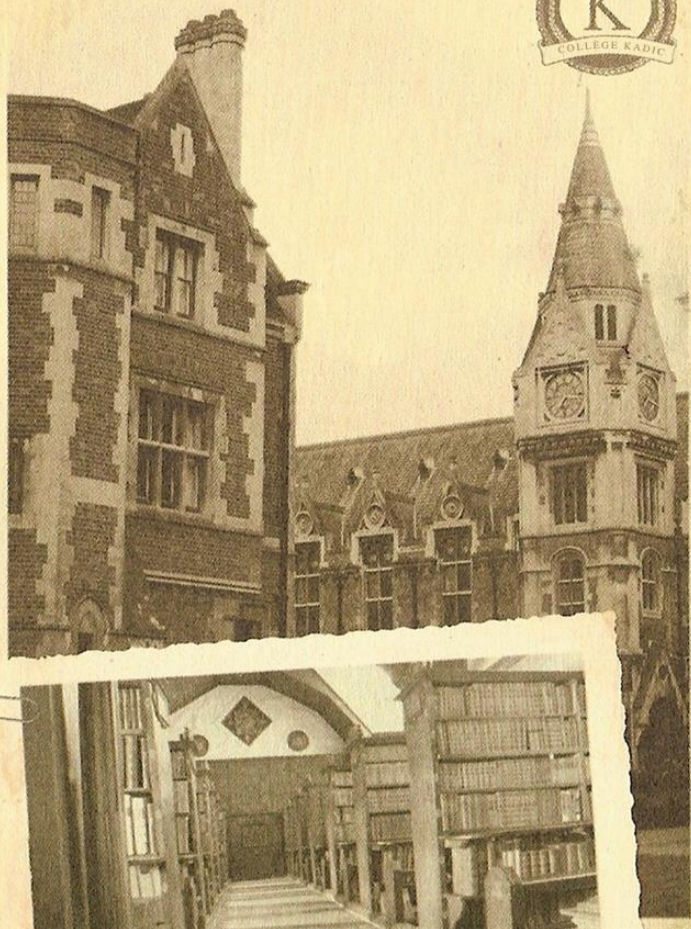
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CODE LYOKO

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

INTRODUCTION

1985. France. A brilliant professor named Waldo Schaeffer and his wife Anthea are working together on an international project of absolute secrecy named Carthage. When Waldo discovers that the true intent of Carthage is not to protect the nations of the world, but instead to develop a lethal new weapon, he decides to leave the project. This choice will lead to irreversible consequences. Anthea Schaeffer is kidnapped by mysterious individuals.

Waldo however manages to save himself and their three-year-old daughter, Aelita. After a lengthy escape, he finds employment as a science teacher at Kadic Academy, in France, and under the name Franz Hopper secretly continues his experiments.

There, in the basements of a disused factory close to the school, he builds a supercomputer and develops a virtual

reality named Lyoko, intended to serve as an antidote to Carthage.

However after several years the organisation for which the professor worked succeed in tracing him.

In 1994, when Aelita is twelve years old, Waldo Schaffer takes refuge in the virtual world of Lyoko with his severely-injured daughter and extinguishes the supercomputer that powers it.

Many years later. Jeremy Belpois, a student at Kadic Academy, is thirteen years old, has few friends, and possesses an innate talent for information technology. Having uncovered the existence of the old factory, through underground tunnels connecting it to Kadic, Jeremy finds the now-abandoned supercomputer and succeeds in reactivating it.

In turn he discovers Aelita, who through the intervening years has remained imprisoned within Lyoko and has not aged. Together with his friends Ulrich, Odd and Yumi, Jeremy manages to materialise Aelita in the real world. From that moment on the five friends devote themselves to an embittered fight against X.A.N.A., a pitiless Artificial Intelligence that has taken possession of Lyoko.

With great effort and after incredible virtual adventures, X.A.N.A. is at last defeated thanks to the sacrifice of Franz Hopper, who survived the many years in Lyoko in the form of a sphere of energy.

They are no longer in danger, not anymore. Or so it seems.

On December 21st, some months after the defeat of X.A.N.A. and Hopper's death, Aelita suddenly loses her memory. Therefore, on the final day of the Christmas holidays, the friends decide to gather in the Hermitage, the villa where she lived for a period of time, to help her recover her lost memories.

The five children begin to investigate the secrets of the Hermitage and discover a hidden room.

Within, they find a video message recorded by the professor which tells part of his history, but nevertheless leaves unsolved many inextricable mysteries.

In his message Hopper entrusts to Aelita the task of finding her mother again and asks her to keep for him a golden pendant: a present that he and Anthea exchanged as a pledge of their love.

In the meantime X.A.N.A., which the children believe to be defeated forever, progressively regains life and possesses an American girl named Eva Skinner. Sometime later, Eva makes her appearance at Kadic.

Jeremy, Ulrich, Odd and Yumi choose to help reunite Aelita with her mother.

They make this choice in good faith: trusting and confident that they are now the only ones aware of the story of Hopper and Lyoko. They are convinced that there is nothing left to threaten them.

And that X.A.N.A. no longer exists.

They are very mistaken...

PROLOGUE

THE MYSTERIOUS CITY

The spires of the city open out before him like the shells of blue ladybugs, punctured by the dark holes of the spaceport. The roads are open, colourful ribbons that interweave between the towers. It is a tranquil moment, with only a few ships flying from one place to another, and almost nobody about. In fact there are never many people in the city. The boy appears from nowhere. The air becomes dense, gathers together at one point, and there he is.

He flexes his fingers and begins to fly, gathering speed, and then falls as he transforms his flight into a dive. He lands on one of the expressways that lead to the Wall and the road surface withdraws docilely to mitigate the impact.

He begins to run: he cannot wait to meet up with his friend and show her the new places he has discovered. He adores flying with her along the secluded roads, venturing

through the parks and into the empty little shops where they can take what they want and devise an infinite number of games.

His friend says the city of pincer-like towers is incredible, but that it is deserted. The boy does not understand what she means: there's himself, the Artificial Intelligences, and then the Professor. Who else could be needed?

At the thought of the Professor the boy feels a slight twinge of guilt: the Professor does not wish for him to assume human form, he says that it is a waste of energy. But his friend has done so, and he wants to at least look a little like her. Perhaps he'll transform himself for her, maybe into those small creatures that she calls 'ladybugs' and which make her laugh.

The road ripples in a curtsey before him, the rough surface becoming smooth and translucent like glass. He starts skating, drops to the ground level with a bound, and starts running again.

The Artificial Intelligence responsible for pedestrian traffic appears suddenly before him. It is a metal beanstalk with three bright and vertically-arranged eyes. One red, one yellow, and one green.

It blocks the road ahead with a bony hand and illuminates its topmost eye, which glows deeply red. As soon as it recognises him, its yellow eye comes alight.

“Sir, you were exceeding the speed limit” the AI reminds him. “May I ask you to slow down?”

The boy waves a hand in front of it: **AUTHORISATION DENIED**. The eye of the traffic controller suddenly becomes green, and the creature moves to let him pass.

“Of course sir, please proceed.”

The boy runs until the palatial buildings around him start merging into a single colourful blur. With a leap and a bound, he vaults a great bridge of entwined cables, and touches down onto the road on the other side. He spots an information-transport AI: it looks like a large squashed egg and is slipping speedily along the street. It must be an important AI, probably working for the Professor. It can give him passage.

The boy jumps onto it from above, his fingers covered in a thin electrical discharge. He lays his hands on the surface and holds on so as not to fall. They pass the first junction. The second junction. Then the boy jumps off and transfers onto the enamel chin of a waste-disposal AI. It is a little slower, but it takes him in the right direction.

The Wall reaches high into the sky and is made from black bricks. Every time the boy skims its surface, clear blue lightning arcs between the Wall and his fingertips. The Wall repels him; it encircles the city and the boy cannot fly over or through it, he cannot pass it.

Set in the Wall is a single portal, but right now the great doors are closed. The boy presses the palm of his hand to it

and on a floating screen that appears from nowhere four shining letters appear. It is the name of the boy, even if he is not aware of it.

The door crumbles in a rain of dust: one moment it is there, the next it is not.

Beyond the threshold, the boy can see the long draw-bridge that disappears on the horizon. It floats in a void, as there is nothing beyond the city, not a moat, or a valley, or a road. Only the bridge, hanging over the dark.

Every so often the boy has imagined what it would be like to cross that bridge, but he has never given it serious consideration. It is not encoded in his directives.

He looks at the bridge and knows that his friend will soon come across it. Sometime soon he will see her thin figure walking with long strides across the floating arches and take flight. Then he will see that little cloud of pink hairs, and that smile.

His friend is a little late, but that does not matter: he can wait, and the city will survive a little longer without him. In any case, other parts of the boy are right now flying over the pagodas, penetrating into the sewers, checking that everything is well. It takes so little effort, that he barely recalls that he is doing it.

Now his friend is very late and the boy begins to worry. What has happened? She has always been punctual when she comes to meet him.

◆ PROLOGUE: THE MYSTERIOUS CITY ◆

So he waits, waits motionless before that infinite bridge.
Every so often he believes he can see her, see her neat pink
hair, little more than a dot, out there in the depths.

His friend will not visit anymore.

But he does not know that yet.

1

THE MAN WITH TWO DOGS



He hated being here. He hated the constant relocating. The fact that his work obliged him to move roughly once a week did not change the issue one iota.

Grigory Nictapolus let his foot sink onto the accelerator and the pickup truck accelerated from one hundred and sixty to one hundred and eighty kilometres per hour. The motor screamed, but he was confident that he could squeeze it up to two hundred and twenty. He had tuned it personally.

“Not long now...my beauties” he whistled quietly, hearing a subdued growling coming from behind. He turned off the autoroute at the first exit without slowing down. It was three o'clock at night and there was no-one else around.

He chose an automated toll booth and paid in cash, pouring a handful of Euros into the small basin. The city welcomed him gradually, first some houses and a small group of industrial sheds, then little-by-little other houses, buildings, apartment blocks.

The aeroplane that Grigory had flown in on landed that afternoon after an eleven-hour flight. His contact was waiting for him at the airport, an insignificant type that had been holding the leash to his two dogs. He had delivered a bunch of keys to him. "For her" the man had said.

Grigory had not responded and limited himself to reclaiming the keys and the dogs.

He had driven without breaks, stopping only to allow the animals to stretch their legs, and now he was hungry and thirsty. And so very sleepy.

Later, he said to himself. First things first, we finish the job.

He reached a tall and narrow turn-of-the-century villa, surrounded by a wooden fence. The garden was covered with snow and it had an almost savage aspect. On the gate a plaque confirmed that this was the Hermitage.

Grigory smacked his lips but kept on driving: he would have to return here later.

He coasted along the street and then crossed the river. On the bridge he turned his head and curiously regarded a little islet that seemed on the verge of sinking under the weight of a deserted factory. Then he turned back, heading towards a

great park. He circled the walled enclosure and the pickup mounted the sidewalk, advancing through the shadows of the night like a jaguar on the hunt.

Between the trees he could see the black roofs of the buildings, buttressed against each other to form an L-shape: the classrooms, the offices, the student dormitories.

So that was Kadic Academy. It looked well-connected: a school for privileged children, spoiled ne'er-do-wells. The wall ended in a great wrought iron gate, currently closed, supported by ornate columns on which the school's coat of arms was emblazoned.

Grigory Nictapolus smiled and got out of the vehicle together with the two dogs. They walked away for several minutes. Then they came back.

Upon their return, one of the dogs became so excited that its teeth latched onto the passenger seat and ripped away a sizable piece of the upholstery.

The man caressed the animal's snout. "I agree; we've done enough investigating for now."

The pickup drove out of the centre of the city and eventually pulled up in front of a large, isolated house in the suburbs, the grounds protected by a rusting fence topped with barbed wire. It was one of those properties that adults seem to not notice, and which children avoid because they fear it.

"Hardly luxurious," Grigory commented to himself. "The Magician could have found me more comfortable accommodations."

He opened the gate with the keys that the contact had passed to him at the airport, parked in the tall grass and got down to let the two dogs out.

They were both huge Rottweilers, strong and aggressive; trained to attack. Their names were Hannibal and Scipio. Grigory Nictapolus rubbed his sharp face to expel the creeping fatigue, grabbed his bags and suitcases from the pickup and started unloading the equipment.

Her room in the dormitory was icy cold, but her bed sheets were soaked with sweat. She had woken up hearing the barking of dogs...just like in her dream. Maybe she was going mad.

Aelita rose, shuddering as her bare feet made contact with the cold floor beneath them. She pulled on a sweater. Her bedroom window faced out over the park, and in the dim light of the darkened, pre-dawn sky she could with a little imagination glimpse the shape of the Hermitage. The house that had belonged to her father, when he was still alive. She combed her light red hair in front of the mirror. Reflected in its surface she saw herself, a young girl of some thirteen years age, but who seemed younger, the eyes ringed with sleep-lines, the face thin and tired. For a moment she saw her face as it appeared in her dreams, with pink hair and the pointed ears of an elf, two vertical bands of makeup painted on her cheeks. Which was her true identity? Aelita Schaeffer, daughter of Waldo and Anthea; Aelita Stones, Odd's fake

cousin and female student of Kadic; or Aelita the elf girl, inhabitant of the virtual world of Lyoko?

Stop thinking like that. Lyoko no longer exists, not anymore.

The girl seized her phone from the bedside table and turned it on.

On the seventh ring a groggy voice answered her:

“Mmm...hello?”

“It’s me.”

“Aelita, what’s the matter...” She got the impression that Jeremy was gropingly searching for his glasses on his own beside cabinet, then she heard him shift and push back the duvet, something falling on the floor. “What time is it?”

“Can you come see me? Please.”

Jeremy did not answer her. But five minutes later, he was knocking on his friend’s door.

Hot chocolate, with a lot of sweetener. Before arriving the boy had passed the vending machine on the ground floor of the dormitories and collected two drinks. Kind and thoughtful, as always.

Jeremy absent-mindedly sipped his drink. He was fair-haired and wore a pair of round-lensed glasses set in black frames, along with a woollen sweater hastily pulled on over his flannel pyjamas: he looked like he had stolen it from an older sibling. And his expression...

“Why are you laughing?” he asked her.

Aelita’s gaze softened. “It’s your face. You always look so serious.”

“That’s not true!” he protested. “It’s just that there’s not enough sugar in this chocolate.”

“You know” Jeremy went on after several seconds of silence. “I’ve thought about it and I believe you should transfer into a double room. That way you’d have a companion, and at night you’d feel less alone.”

Aelita impulsively seized his hands and shook her head.

“No.”

“Why not? You’ve not slept properly since we returned to Kadic, and when you do sleep you wake up in the middle of the night, terrified.”

“It’ll pass.”

“And what about the nightmares? Always the same dream?”

Aelita managed to swallow half of her chocolate in a single go.

“More or less” she murmured. “Do you remember my father’s video? And the photo of that house with the mountains reflected in the windows?”

Jeremy nodded. At the end of the Christmas holidays he, Aelita and their friends had taken refuge at the Hermitage to share one day together and to help her recover her memories of past events. In the villa’s basement they had discovered a secret room and a mysterious video left by Professor Hopper,

Aelita's father. The boy had watched it almost a hundred times.

Aelita continued: "That house is always in the dream. My father is working outside and Mummy is in their room. Except then..."

"Except then your mother disappears" Jeremy concluded for her.

"Yes. I run to her and find the wardrobe wide open, the glass smashed in the window frames, her dresses scattered and trampled on the floor. And then I feel that someone is there with me. In the house. He's nearby, and he's breathing heavily. I'm afraid that he'll catch me and then..."

"Aelita, calm down. That video of your father must have upset you. This is just your imagination."

"I'm not mistaken" she replied, looking her friend straight in the face. "It's not like that. These are my memories Jeremy, memories that I had forgotten. And then in the dream a huge, black dog has suddenly appeared, and its muzzle is soiled with blood. And then it starts chasing me. I woke up just before it bit me...and it seemed to me that I actually could hear dogs barking in the grounds, right under my bedroom window."

Jeremy caught her hand. It was so cold, compared to his. Aelita blushed.

"So what do we do now?" she asked.

"We go to breakfast" he answered with a laugh. "But first I have to go back to my room briefly."

“Why?”

“To get dressed! We can’t meet with the others in our pyjamas.”

Jeremy and Aelita got ready, ate breakfast together and then headed out into the school courtyard. Waiting for them were their closest friends, those with whom they had shared the extraordinary secret of Lyoko, those who they had been speaking of during the sleepless night. The friends who made growing up seem less arduous. Odd Della Robbia, wearing a gymnastics tracksuit, his absurdly-styled hair defying the breeze. Ulrich Stern, thin and muscular, leaning against a column. And Yumi Ishiyama, her straight corvine hair gleaming against her pale face, almond-eyed, and as usual completely dressed in black.

Yumi, the only one of the group who did not live on the campus, but in a house a short distance away with her parents and little brother, was inserting some coins into the coffee machine, while behind her Odd and Ulrich were sniggering together in amusement.

“Well, what’s so funny?” Jeremy asked as he and Aelita approached them.

Odd answered, breathless with laughter: “Mpf! Nothing at all, except that Sissi...Ulrich...Hey, what’s with the tired faces? Were you guys up late again?”

“I had the nightmare again last night” Aelita hurriedly explained.

“It’s that secret room in the Hermitage that’s to blame” Yumi tried to reassure her. “That video of your father has upset you.”

The girl took her cappuccino from the machine and stirred in the sugar with a plastic teaspoon. She was the tallest of the group, dominating Ulrich in height by the full span of a hand, but she looked so frail and slender that a stranger would find it hard to imagine her dressed in the garb of a warrior. And that’s what she was, a warrior. Strong and combative. Unable to resist, Ulrich looked furtively towards her.

Just like him, Yumi was reserved: never letting her emotions shine through. That was why they made good teammates. And maybe something more...

Ulrich looked away. “It was a good thing that we found that video. Now we’ve got clues, a new trail to follow” he commented.

“Everyone gets bad dreams once in a while Aelita” Odd confirmed. “You shouldn’t read too deeply into them. And now we have history class: the ideal means to fall blissfully asleep.”

“Don’t be stupid Odd” Ulrich hissed. “And we’d better get moving, unless we want to be late.”

“I’ve got to get away as well, Professor Meyer is setting us a mathematics test” echoed Yumi, who was an academic year ahead of them and so attending different classes.

“See ya later then” Ulrich said with a smile.

Ulrich, Odd, Jeremy and Aelita arrived in their classroom five minutes late and rushed inside as the teacher closed the door. Despite their speed they froze up, petrified by the unexpected and corpulent figure of Principal Delmas, who regarded them fiercely from behind the lenses of his glasses.

“So you’ve finally chosen to grace us with your presence, have you?”

Jeremy tried to explain, and then he turned towards Odd and noticed that his friend seemed paralysed. But not by Delmas. Instead he was transfixed by the person standing next to the principal. A girl. She was not very tall, wore her fair hair cut short, had a golden complexion and large, celestial eyes. She was not part of the student body: Jeremy would certainly have remembered her. And from the look of things it seemed she had torpedoed Odd at first sight.

“Della Robbia, are you waiting to take your seat?” The authoritative tone in the principal’s voice brought Odd to his sense. “All of you to your places, quickly.”

The children were quickly seated and the history teacher took her place behind the desk. Delmas cleared his throat, as if to make an official announcement.

“Very well” he began. “I am sorry that this announcement could not have been made a week ago at the beginning of term, but better late than never, yes? In any case, students, I am happy to present to you a new classmate who as of today will be attending our school: Eva Skinner.”

“Pleased to meet you” the girl murmured, staring fixedly at a point in front of her.

“My pleasure!” Odd yelled suddenly, all too loudly in the silence of the classroom.

Everyone burst into laughter and he turned red up to the tips of his hair, until finally the principal restored silence. “Yes, we’re sure it’s a pleasure for you Odd, thank you for that contribution. So, Eva has just arrived with her parents from the United States of America. Which city may I ask?”

The girl stared at him without answering. Delmas smiled indulgently. “Perhaps you still haven’t mastered our language. Where do you come from, Eva?” he asked, slowly enunciating the words.

Eva answered without looking at him: “États-Unis d’Amérique.”

Her French was spoken with a very strange accent. Jeremy glanced at Odd, who was staring at Eva with an expression like a blanched fish, his eyes glazed and his mouth hanging half-open. Ulrich, who was seated beside him, jabbed him in the ribs with an elbow to bring him back to reality.

“Well” the principal continued. “I suppose that you will tell us all about your home city in due course.” Then he again addressed the class: “Meanwhile I wish for you all to receive Eva enthusiastically. She will not be living on campus, as her parents live not too far away, but remember that today our

newly-arrived friend is taking her first steps on a long journey...”

Odd saw that Jeremy was looking towards him, and mouthed the words: “she’s so hot!”

“...in short, please help her to integrate into our school community and make her feel welcome...not too welcome Mister Della Robbia, I beg of you.”

More laughter ensued.

Grigory Nictapulus had not washed or changed his clothes: he had not had the time to. But the living room had changed, in appearance at least. On the floor, a bare layer of rough cement laid by the builders many years ago, the two dogs were rolled out. Hannibal and Scipio were contentedly dining on a quarter-portion of raw ox, tearing at the meat with their teeth.

Grigory had prepped the equipment and had even managed to grab a few hours sleep. Now bundles of electrical cabling hung on the walls, fixed in place with black adhesive tape. Two great monitors were set up on the floor, forty-two inch models of Chinese manufacture, along with about ten or twelve smaller units. Besides them he had installed two parabolic antennas on the roof, positioned so that they were not visible from the road, along with two secondary aerials in the house itself. And then there was the CB: a low-frequency amateur radio receiver; a police scanner to intercept transmissions to and from patrol cars in the area; a computer

connected to the monitors, along with two separate computers, and the Internet connection, naturally.

Of everything that he had offloaded from the pickup only three cases remained sealed. Two were full of video cameras and 'bugs', surveillance devices. The third was stamped with the emblem of a green phoenix and contained the Machine, his precious archive of memory cards. Grigory caressed the lock of the big box and poured himself a cup of tea. He would only use the Machine in due course, when the time was right.

An automatic rifle was lying on the carpet, next to the principal computer's keyboard. It was an XM8 assault rifle, a prototype developed for the US Army which had never entered into production. A big boy's toy. Grigory did not think he would actually need the use of weapons to bring this operation to a close, but their presence helped him to concentrate.

He sat on the carpet and woke the computer up from standby mode. From the unit's speakers there rumbled the voice of a girl: *"...memories that I had forgotten. And then in the dream a huge, black dog has suddenly appeared, and its muzzle is soiled with blood. And then it starts chasing me..."*

Grigory did not need to consult the dossier to identify the speaker: Aelita Stones, alias Aelita Hopper, alias Aelita Schaeffer.

A dog. So, the girl had heard his puppies in her sleep. He had to remember to be more cautious.

The playback cut out by itself. Two, three seconds.

“*We go to breakfast.*” This was a different voice. The voice recognition software matched it and pulled up an image on the screen: Jeremy Belpois.

The directional microphone Grigory had installed was working well, but the acquisition radius was too narrow. Within twenty-four hours one hundred percent of the girl’s bedroom would be covered.

He stopped drinking his tea when a black window suddenly appeared on his display:

Classified Call with Active Encryption. Security Level 1. Accept?

Grigory accepted the call and on two twin monitors the head and shoulders of a man appeared. He was about seventy years old and wore a grey jacket and a white dress shirt with a deep collar and a blue necktie. The two ends of the collar were held together with a pin fashioned in the likeness of a bird, the emblem of the Green Phoenix. This was his chief: Hannibal Mago.

‘The Magician’ was playing with the mouse of his computer, the rings that covered his fingers tinkling. His head was shrouded in gloom and a large hat with a wide brim hid his eyes and half of his face: all that could be glimpsed was a square-set jaw and a wide mouth that was opened in a sneering grin, putting on two gold teeth on display that were set in place of the canines.

“Grigory, good day.”

“And to you, sir.”

The voice of the Magician was profound, masked and distorted by electronic instrumentation. Grigory knew that however much work he put in, he would not be able to extract a recognisable audio print from it.

“Have you had a good journey?”

“The base is operational, sir” Grigory answered. “I estimate that I will have placed all the surveillance devices by tomorrow, including in the villa.”

The Magician smacked his lips. “Excellent. But remember that surveillance is only one of your objectives. Now that our mark has proved to be active in Kadic Academy, it is an absolute priority to acquire fresh information.”

“Yes sir.”

Grigory shrank the image of his superior to free up space on the monitor and began to search through the digital dossier: “Do you have any preferences, sir? Who do you want me to start with?”

“Such matters do not concern me, Grigory” In spite of the electronic distortion, the Magician’s voice seemed to turn colder. “It interests me only that our project moves ahead. I want documents signed by the Professor. I want the codes.”

“Yessir.”

“But, above all else, I want confirmation that this famous supercomputer actually exists. The treasonous actions of our most trusted agent ten years ago were a hard blow. And I

have every intention of taking my revenge. Do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly, sir."

In a window on the screen an image had appeared of a little boy, his blond hair firing up from his head and a comical dog in his lap; behind him were two grown-ups with a disgustingly happy and cheerful air about them.

A name flashed up under the photo. Odd...

"...Della Robbia. I'll start with them, sir."

The Magician's only answer was croaking laughter.

2

WALDO SCHAEFFER'S DOSSIER



Odd stuck the spoon in his mouth. The liquid was piping hot. He swallowed it down. Ulrich tapped him on the shoulder: “Hey, isn’t that vegetable soup?”

“Mmm” the boy nodded absently. Another spoonful.

“What is he doing?” Yumi broke in, surprised.

Ulrich shrugged his shoulders: Odd seemed to have finally gone mad...until now he had consistently loathed vegetables.

In truth, Odd’s gaze was lost far and away beyond the dish in front of him, past the table and beyond his friends: to be precise, it was fixed on the opposite side of Kadic’s cafeterias, where Eva Skinner was just approaching the self-service

counter. After a moment's uncertainty, Eva took a tray, imitating the other students, also laying some cutlery and a glass on it. She then came to Rosa the cook, a large, smiling woman in a great white apron.

"Steamed vegetables or fries dear?"

The girl stared unresponsively at her.

"Are you quite alright?" Rosa enquired.

Ulrich, who was following the little scene, commented:

"What's she doing? Hasn't she ever been in a cafeteria in her life?"

"What does it matter?" Odd murmured dreamily. "She is so beautiful."

"Looks like the new girl's having some trouble" commented Sissi, appearing from behind them.

According to some, Elizabeth (she preferred Sissi) Delmas was the most beautiful girl in the school. According to everyone, she was certainly the most unpleasant, and all but untouchable given she was the principal's daughter. As always, Sissi entered the cafeteria flanked by her two would-be suitors, Herve and Nicolas. They headed quickly towards the new arrival.

Sissi grabbed a tray next to Eva with a sardonic sneer. "You see?" she all but shouted, so that everyone could hear. "It's not so hard. Now you order what you want, and then you sit and eat. You have to use these: they're called cut-le-ry. This is how they work...Poor little thing, perhaps you don't have them in America."

Herve and Nicolas laughed scornfully.

Eva smiled angelically. "You're very kind. You're the waitress, yes? If you could please serve me my food and lead me to a table? Some of those green things please, and also a rasher of that thing there. Thank you."

Sissi turned a rabid shade of red. "Me, the waitress? How dare you?!"

Odd, Ulrich and the rest of the student body were laughing coarsely.

With great strides Sissi left, furious.

"But I thought we were going to eat!" Nicolas protested.

"I've lost my appetite!" she hissed coldly.

As the three of them hurriedly left the cafeteria, Ulrich inserted a piece of bread into Odd's mouth, which was hanging half-open. "Nevertheless!" he commented. "Your new friend has a lovely personality."

Jeremy's room was one of the few single-occupancy bedrooms reserved by the school for male students. Bare of decorations, except for a giant poster of Einstein hanging over the bed, it was for the most part occupied by a huge desk.

For a time some three-quarters of the table's surface had been invaded and held by Jeremy's computer, which had always been in communication with the supercomputer in the abandoned factory. But when Lyoko had disappeared for good the boy had practically renounced the field of Information Technology and had boxed everything away in his

wardrobe. It was his way of marking the passing of the virtual world and a means to visually manifest that mourning. Now on the desk there was instead a TV, a laptop computer on which to surf the Internet, and some books and magazines.

“Guys, I’m worried about Aelita” Jeremy sighed.

They had all reunited in his room. Yumi and Ulrich were sitting cross-legged on the floor. On the bed, Odd was playing with Kiwi, his bull terrier, a yappy little dog with very little hair and a disproportionately large snout compared to the rest of his body, who was bouncing on his master’s stomach with a very satisfied attitude.

“Meh, they’re only nightmares” said Odd, trying to down-play things.

“They’re not just nightmares. Aelita’s had detailed dreams in the past as well, remember? I think these indicate that we should be trying to find her mother. We know that she was kidnapped, but we don’t know by whom. Nor even where she is now.”

“Bags of time have passed since then, Jeremy” Yumi couldn’t help but note. “Aelita was very little at the time, if this memory even is of her mother. After all these years Anthea might well be...”

“We’ll never know for sure if we don’t at least try” Jeremy cut her off. “And we should also find out as much as possible about Professor Hopper. Every time we gain new information on him, things just become more and more complicated. For

example, why did he create Lyoko? And why would he then help us destroy it?"

"It looks obvious to me: X.A.N.A." objected Ulrich. "If we hadn't deactivated Lyoko, it might have conquered our world."

Jeremy spread his arms wide, exasperated. "But X.A.N.A. was also created by Professor Hopper, as it turned out! And then again, consider this: how much longer can we continue passing Aelita off as Odd's cousin? During the holidays we ran the risk of the police discovering the truth, and that time we were only saved by a hair's breadth. But sooner or later someone will go checking, or telephone the Della Robbias who will say that this younger cousin Aelita Stones does not exist!"

Odd laid Kiwi on the ground and cocked his head. "Jeremy, cut it short. You already have something in mind, an infallible plan or something similar. It's written all over your face."

"More or less" the boy replied, smiling. He adjusted the glasses on his nose. "So, we know that in 1988 Hopper hid here in Kadic with Aelita, and for a period of time was a science teacher in the school."

Odd looked obliquely towards him. "Then you want to..."

"Enquire with the person who is currently in his former position, for example. And that person is Professor Hertz. If she replaced Hopper, it could be that she herself knows something."

Ulrich sighed. "Hertz is an over-serious and quiet woman. What could she know about kidnappings, virtual worlds and secret agents?"

Jeremy shook his head. "Guys, we don't have another choice."

The afternoon light dimmed little by little over the park that spread out in front of Kadic Academy, the shadows of the trees lengthening towards the opulent school buildings. It was getting cold, and the snow was still piled in heaps on the footpaths and between the flowerbeds.

Aelita was alone, sitting on a bench, sliding her fingers over a golden pendant, one of the few objects that she had left as a connection to her father: Waldo Schaeffer officially, Franz Hopper to the school. Many names populated her memories as well. Names that spoke of so many lives tied together: her own. The pendant was a flat disk on a simple golden chain. On its surface were carved a W and an A, along with the drawing of a sailor's knot.

Aelita had done some research and discovered that this particular knot was called a 'Double Englishman' or 'Double Fisherman'. It was used to bind together two separate pieces of rope, and the more the two ropes were pulled on in an attempt to break the knot, the tighter it became. The message was clear: Waldo and Anthea, tied together forever.

But the pendant had not been enough to keep them united. Her father and mother had been separated for almost

twenty years now. She shook her head, as if to drive a thought away: no, the truth was that her father and mother would be divided forever. He had died, and Mummy...

“Why are you crying?”

Eva Skinner had a strange smile, which seemed both embarrassed and distant all at the same time. Aelita dried her eyes with the sleeve of her coat: Eva had only just arrived at Kadic, everything had to be new to her. Despite the lateness of the afternoon she seemed to not yet be feeling the cold, wearing only a light cotton sweater.

“It’s nothing” Aelita replied self-consciously, hiding the precious little necklace under her jersey.

“I can go away if you want” Eva said.

Aelita shook her head. “Don’t go; you’re not bothering me. And sitting here crying isn’t going to do me any good.”

After a little while, seeing that her new companion was not speaking, Aelita added: “I saw you earlier today in the cafeteria, did you know? With Sissi. You shouldn’t worry too much about her, she’s always overbearing.”

“It doesn’t matter” Eva said. “It’s just because I’m the new girl.”

Aelita smiled. “Yes, I understand that feeling.”

In actual fact Aelita was hardly ‘the new girl’: she had attended Kadic once before many years ago. But then there had been Lyoko, and she had not aged during that time, so that when she returned to the real world it had all seemed so utterly strange to her. She was practically a foreigner.

Feeling a certain kinship with Eva, Aelita suddenly realised that the girl's French was much improved compared to earlier in the morning. Incredibly improved, to tell the truth. It seemed that Eva now knew far more words, and also her strange accent was less pronounced. She had to be a very switched-on person; she was learning in a hurry.

Aelita then offered her hand. "If you have any more problems, then you can count on me for help."

In other words: "Friends?"

"I'll do that" Eva smiled, gripping the hand.

In other words: "Friends."

In order to carry his plan to fruition, Jeremy waited until six in the afternoon, when Professor Hertz always shut herself in her office to correct the students' homework.

The office of the science teacher bore more than a passing resemblance to the laboratory of an alchemist: it was small and cluttered with curious objects that occupied not just the surface of her desk and bookshelves, but also the floor and the windowsills. There were voltaic pile batteries and alembics, tidy sets of test tubes full of chemical components, sextants and oscillometers.

Professor Hertz was a small and slender woman, with a huge pair of round glasses and a shock of curly grey hair, untidy and reaching down past her shoulders. As always she was wearing a lab coat and when Jeremy presented himself to her, was consulting an enormous list of notes.

“Jeremy!” she exclaimed, noticing him. “What brings you here at this hour? Are you having trouble with your research on cellular biology?”

The boy looked for a free space where he could seat himself. He did not find it. In the end he sat himself down on a stack of Scientific American back-issues dated 1998-2004, which had been piled up to form a voluminous cube in front of the desk.

He cleared his throat, uncertain of where to begin. “Well, Professor, ahem. In fact I’m looking for information on the science teacher who was in residence here at Kadac before you, Franz Hopper.”

Hertz’s eyebrow’s rose over her paperwork and Jeremy understood that he now had her full attention. But he felt a definite undertone that suggested the professor was not enthused at his request.

“Just out of casual interest?” she asked, feigning indifference.

“Not at all” he tried to divert her focus. “In the school library I found a book by Professor Hopper, an introduction to the first principals of quantum mechanics...”

“...as applied to the field of informatics. Yes, I know it quite well. But it seems to me to be far too advanced for a boy of your age.”

Alarm bells rang in Jeremy’s mind: if Hertz was familiar with the book, perhaps she had an interest in quantum com-

puting. Did she know that Hopper had built just such a system in the old factory so close to the school?

He decided to leave that issue for another occasion. "The figure of Professor Hopper has made me curious. I mean, he was teaching here, in our school. Did you know him?"

"Yes. No...somewhat. I began to teach at Kadic only after he vacated the position."

"But if I'm not mistaken as to the timing, even if you were not teaching prior to that point, you were a laboratory assistant here" Jeremy insisted. "You had to have worked with the professor for at least two years, correct?"

"Jeremy" Hertz interrupted, losing her patience. "Do you want to make this an interrogation? Yes, ten or so years ago I was an assistant in the chemistry lab, but Professor Hopper was not particularly interested in that subject. I met him twice at the most, no more. And that is all."

Jeremy limited himself to nodding, little convinced. That whole story stank. He tried another line of attack: "But do you know where he's gone, Professor? In 1994 he left the school and then it seems he disappeared completely..."

"Much as it displeases me, I know nothing about it" she cut him short. "And you, instead of obsessing over quantum physics, would do better to concentrate on biology: need I remind you that your work on cells is due in tomorrow. You may leave."

The boy rose, stumbled on a large electromagnet and risking knocking over the stack of magazines on which he had

been sitting. Never before had the science teacher succeeded in dismissing him so speedily or directly.

When he left, he pushed the office door to, but did not shut it all the way. The corridor was deserted, no teachers in sight: after all it was almost time for dinner. He pressed himself up against the wall and stood motionless, one ear turned towards the slightly open door.

He got the impression that the professor was letting out a deep sigh, and then he heard her lift the telephone receiver and dial a number.

“Headmaster? It’s Susan Hertz. Jeremy Belpois has just been here”. There was a pause. “He was asking questions about Franz Hopper. Yes, thank you. I’ll come over right away.”

Jeremy ran for it.

There was a stain on the wall that was reminding him of something. Lying on his stomach in his dorm room, Odd tried to concentrate: there it was...a heart. Eva Skinner’s mouth.

Uff, he had to stop thinking about her and focus on studying: there was a French Literature exam the next day and he still had not even opened the textbook. He seized the book from where it been laying face-down on the floor, where Kiwi had been gnawing on the cover. The dog barked in protest at the theft of his snack.

“Good boy” grumbled Odd. “I’ll take you out later.”

He started reading. Stendhal was the most important writer of the Eva Skinner period. His masterwork *Eva loves Odd* is without a doubt *Eva Skinner's...*

Mmm, no. This was not going well.

Kiwi barked again.

“Oh would you do me a favour and shut up!” he slammed the book closed and threw it towards the dog.

Yelping, Kiwi squeezed past the bedroom door.

Odd roused himself. “Hey, boy, where the heck are you going? You can't...”

Barefoot, he ran into the corridor, and saw that Kiwi was rushing down the stairs, trotting towards the grounds.

“Stop!” he yelled in the dog's direction. *If someone sees him it'll be a disaster!* he thought.

Pets were forbidden at Kadic. He had successfully kept Kiwi hidden for almost three years now, but there was always the danger of discovery.

“Is that you Odd, have you lost your shoes?” Sissi said, peeping from the door of her bedroom.

“Yes, they've escaped. Along with your brain too, I believe. Oh, and if you find them again, please let me know” he replied. Not wasting another second he rushed outside. In the grounds the sun had now sunk completely behind the main building and it was becoming very cold.

Odd ran towards the sports pitch: Kiwi had definitely gone in that direction. Except that the sports pitch was next door to the gymnasium. And the gym was the domain of...

“Jim! Oh crap!” Odd breathed.

Jim Morales was younger than the other teachers: consequently nearly all the students treated him more like an overgrown friend than an educator. He was not particularly unpleasant. So long as you did not annoy him. Of thickset and massive build, he was always dressed in a gymnastics tracksuit, though that was to be expected given he was the PE teacher. His hair was pushed up by an elasticised sweatband and he permanently wore a big band-aid on his cheek that, according to him, gave him the air of a fighter. According to Odd it made him look like he had cut himself really badly while shaving, but he would never have said it to his face.

Jim was currently bent over Kiwi and rubbing the dog’s belly.

“Hey, who’s a nice dog, what are you doing here? Have you gotten lost?”

As soon as he saw Odd, Kiwi leapt to his paws and ran to meet him. The boy took him in his arms. “Good boy, Kiwi” he murmured. “Look at the lovely mess you’ve landed us in.”

“I’ll have you know he’s done nothing wrong” responded Morales, towering over him. “On the contrary, he’s a nice doggy. But you know perfectly well that pets are not allowed on the campus.”

Odd squared his shoulders. “But he’s not mine, I’d never seen him until you just introduced him to me.”

Kiwi licked his face.

The PE teacher smiled, sarcastically. "I see, I see. And goodness knows how you managed to call him by his name! Now we'll go together to your room, leave the dog there, and then we'll make a little visit to the principal, what do you say? He'll decide the punishment you deserve."

Inside the gym, Yumi and Ulrich were engaged against each other in a kung-fu sparring match, while in a corner Aelita observed them while listening to a little music.

When Jeremy entered, Yumi took advantage of Ulrich's momentary distraction, with an improvised move, seized hold of his T-shirt. In a moment the two of them were on the floor, in a tangle of arms and legs. For an instant they remained fixated, and then they picked themselves up. They were both red in the face, and not just from the labour of training.

"So?" Ulrich asked Jeremy, massaging his numb shoulder.

Aelita removed her headphones and turned off her MP3 player. Then she looked at her two friends with an interrogative air. "So what?"

Jeremy suddenly came out in a cold sweat. "Well...here...I know that we should have told you...but we thought that...in short."

Yumi readily intervened in his aid: "He's been speaking with Hertz to try and find out anything about your father. We thought it might be a good way to at least turn up some leads."

Aelita turned to glance at the girl. “And Jeremy decided not to tell me? Thanks a lot.”

Jeremy swallowed. Perhaps, if he dug through the gym’s linoleum carpet, it would be possible for him to sink into the centre of the Earth and disappear forever. It was worth a try.

Aelita advanced on him. “Yes, thank you muchly, it was very, very...” she changed her tone. “...kind of you. Thank you.” And she planted a kiss on his cheek.

Jeremy’s heart skipped several beats.

“I can hear noises outside” grunted Ulrich.

Yumi sighed. “It’s just Jim shouting, as usual.”

“Better to check, anyway, I think I can hear Odd’s voice as well. You carry on without me.”

The boy ran outside, but the teacher had already gone.

“Ehm. Are we disturbing?” Jim Morales asked in an unusually modest tone.

Principal Delmas’s glare could have incinerated him from behind his glasses.

“Jim, you should learn to knock” he said.

“Uh, well, excuse me.”

Odd appeared from behind the teacher’s back. Professor Hertz was also in the principal’s office. She looked even more serious than usual.

“Mister Delmas” the woman concluded. “It’s high time I returned to my work. Many thanks.”

“It’s nothing, I’m up-to-date. Good evening.”

The two of them seemed very embarrassed. Hertz left without even a sign of greeting to Jim or Odd, and the principal hurriedly closed the booklet that was lying open on his desk, a yellowed folder.

But, before Delmas filed it away in a box, Odd managed to read the inscription on the cover: *Waldo Schaeffer*. That was the true name of Franz Hopper, the name that the scientist had used before taking refuge in Kadic!

Odd remembered suddenly that Jeremy had promised to speak to Hertz that afternoon. His brain was fired into motion: Jeremy speaks with Hertz; Hertz runs straight to the principal; the principal has a file on Waldo Schaeffer...very, very strange.

In the meantime, Jim had explained the matter of Kiwi to the principal.

“And where have you left this dog?” he had asked.

“In the boy’s room.”

The principal addressed Odd gravely: “Keeping animals in the dormitories is strictly forbidden. I will have to suspend you for several days for this. Meanwhile, we will go collect this dog.”

With every step they took towards the room he shared with Ulrich, Odd despaired more and more. He was going to be suspended. There were worse things that could happen in life than an unexpected week’s worth of holiday, but now Eva had arrived: a wonderful girl enters the class and he was suspended? It wasn’t fair!

By order of the headmaster he opened the door. As usual, the old room was in disorder. Ulrich's martial arts posters decorated the wall on his side, and over Odd's bed hung a poster of the mythical Harry Metal chopping through an amplifier with his electric guitar. The French Literature textbook lay on the floor.

"Well, where would this dog be?" the headmaster asked, looking around himself.

Jim scratched his head, perplexed. "It must have hidden somewhere. Just wait a second..." and he bent over to search under the beds.

Odd felt new hope growing inside of him and ventured: "Sir, I did say to Jim that the dog was not mine."

"It's definitely here" the gym teacher grumbled as he opened the wardrobes and several boxes; he even tried looking under the bedside table lampshades.

"That's enough Jim, this is getting ridiculous. Get back on your feet."

"Mister Delmas" protested Odd. "You can't suspend me for a dog that doesn't exist!"

"Not that I trust your words," retorted Delmas "but since the dog is evidently not here you will instead spend two days confined to quarters. A teacher will come to collect you at the end of your lessons and will then reaccompany you to your chamber. At which point you will be **ABSOLUTELY PROHIBITED** from leaving. Are we clear?"

The boy dipped his head. At least he might get to see Eva in class.

“Yes” he murmured.

“As for you Jim, come with me. We need to have a discussion or two as to whether the gymnastic teacher should be interrupting the headmaster for dogs that do not exist.”

The secretary's computer password was simplicity itself: *sissidelmas*, the name of the principal's daughter. Jeremy had discovered this during the first week of his first year at the school.

Booting up his laptop computer, he entered into the secretarial database, examining the staff dossiers. At a glance, Professor Hertz really had been a lab assistant during the years of Hopper's tenure, but the laboratory listed was that of physics, not chemistry. So Hertz had lied to him, and it was impossible that she had met Hopper only twice at the most.

Jeremy searched through the digital archives until he found Franz Hopper's dossier. It contained only a few scant lines: the graduation dates of his degrees, the titles of some of his publications. Even the file photo attached was darkened, practically unrecognisable.

He dwelt on the last line of the dossier: *June 6th 1994, resignation tendered. See enclosed letter.* But there was no letter enclosed, and Jeremy doubted Hopper could ever have written one. That was the period in which the scientist had created Lyoko, and with Aelita in tow, had taken refuge in the

virtual world of his invention; June 6th was the exact date of his disappearance.

Jeremy reflected. Hopper had taken refuge in Lyoko because someone was searching for him. It was obvious that he could not have presented a letter of resignation prior to that escape: it would have been a sure sign of his intention to flee. Then it was all a lie. But why? Who had covered up the escape of the teacher, and who had helped him previously to hide in Kadic? And above all why had Hopper tried to take shelter in Lyoko, when he knew all he would find there was X.A.N.A., the enemy?

Too many things that made no sense, too many questions without answers.

At that moment, the bulb in the desk's lamp exploded with a flat crack that made him start. The laptop computer flickered out and rebooted automatically.

Jeremy pushed himself back from the keyboard, his eyes wide open as if he had just seen a monster.

The current spiking. Bulbs bursting. This seemed like one of the electrical attacks that X.A.N.A. had unleashed against Kadic so many times. But it was not possible: the Artificial Intelligence had been destroyed and Lyoko had been extinguished. So, this had to be just a coincidence.

Jeremy switched off the computer and lay down on his bed.

He was a scientist.

He did not believe in coincidence.

3

KIWI INJURED



Yumi's home was in a quiet neighbourhood, ten minutes from Kadic by foot. It was an elegant little villa, with a well-kept but small garden that Ulrich felt had a slight 'Japanese' touch to it. But right now the boy had no time to consider the plants.

He rang the doorbell while trying to hide Kiwi in his jacket, and hoped with all his heart that Yumi's parents were not at home.

"Oh, it's you" his friend said, quickly answering.

"How exciting..." Ulrich commented ironically. "Well I'm glad to see you in any case. Can I come in? Is anyone else around?"

"No, just Hiroki and me" she replied as she let him in.

Ulrich slipped his shoes off before setting foot on the parquet flooring inside the house. Yumi's parents had lived in France for many years, but they maintained the traditions of their native land. Shoes were not allowed to be worn inside the house, for guests and hosts alike. He wiggled his toes inside their socks: he hoped that they did not stink after the run he had just made.

The interior of the house was furnished in an oriental style: as well as chairs and a table of conventional height, there was also a lower table around which cushions were arranged on which to kneel. And in the bedrooms there were no beds, but instead *futons*, thin Japanese mattresses laid directly onto the wooden floor, or *tatami*.

In the living room Hiroki, Yumi's ten-year-old brother, was sitting atop a mountain of cushions, engrossed with a video game. The television's volume was turned up to infernal levels and it sounded as if an entire army of hideous monsters were marching on the house.

"Would you do me a favour and turn that down?" Yumi yelled to make herself heard over the chaos. Then she directed her attention to Ulrich. "So, what are you doing here?"

Kiwi decided this was the ideal moment to declare himself to the world: leaping out of Ulrich's jacket he ran into Hiroki's arms, but not before his paws had soiled the entire expanse of the Ishiyamas' tasteful living room floor.

Ulrich looked down at his clothes: his T-shirt and the inside of his jacket were torn and soaked with mud.

“Oh, great...”

“What is he doing here?” Yumi demanded.

Ulrich sighed. “When I left the gymnasium I saw Jim dragging Odd off, and Odd had Kiwi in his arms. The little runt got himself caught. So I followed them; Jim left the dog in our bedroom and then accompanied Odd to the principal. I managed to get Kiwi out just in time, and a good thing too as Odd would have been suspended otherwise.”

Yumi’s fists were clenched to her sides. “You’ve still not answered me. What’s he doing here?”

“I didn’t know where else to go! You’re the only one of our group who doesn’t live in the dormitories...so, since we can’t keep him, at least for a while...I was going to ask if you could take care of Kiwi....say, for a few days! Just until things calm down.”

Yumi’s voice was as cold as ice on his ears. “You have gone mad, right? It’s out of the question. What would my Mum and Dad say?”

Ulrich felt a wave of irritation rising up his back. “Well, it’s not like you ever considered what they had to say important before. And what matters now is helping Odd.”

“Really, you want to talk to me about parents? Just give me the pleasure! And in any case, the answer is no!”

“Hey! Calm down you two” little Hiroki intervened. “I’ll take care of Kiwi. He’s my friend!”

The dog confirmed this by licking his face.

“I already said that we’re not going to discuss this” Yumi rebuked him.

Ulrich ignored her, stooping down to Hiroki’s level. “Thanks for this, kid, Odd will be grateful to you forever”. Then he addressed them both. “Ok, so that’s settled. Now excuse me but I’ve got to dash.”

Quickly he turned his back to them and left, stopping only to pull his shoes back onto his feet as he hopped down the garden path.

His parents. Yumi just had to bring up that particular subject. Ulrich did not get along well with them most of the time, particularly his father: an old-fashioned, overly severe type of man. Certainly it would be wonderful if things could be resolved between them, to return to the old days, when they were still a united family and there was not a constant sense of tension at home. But now that possibility seemed like a mirage. He started running towards Kadic as fast as possible, trying not to think. Because he had no desire to think. He had no desire to think about anything.

A photo of Ulrich: he was smiling, his eyes squeezed shut because of the bright sunlight falling on his face. The photo was stuck to the page of a diary, and was framed with little drawings of flowers.

Yumi sighed and spread herself out across her bed. The door was locked: she did not want Hiroki to know she kept a

diary. Or that she made drawings of flowers. He would never let her forget it if he did.

She turned the page. Here was a sketch of how Ulrich appeared on Lyoko, in the uniform of a samurai: a white headband holding back his hair, wearing an elegant kimono and carrying a *katana*, a long warrior's sword, at his side. The first time she had materialised onto the virtual world, Yumi had discovered that the both of them were dressed in classical Japanese costumes. She, in fact, had assumed the form of a geisha, wearing extremely traditional makeup and a kimono, secured at the back with a thick sash or *obi*.

She went back to the first pages of the diary, where there were a few scribbled notes: the story of their first meeting. *I was in the gym, practising martial arts, and I sparred with this boy, Ulrich. He moves well and with incredible agility, in a few years he might become a master in the discipline. But in the end I beat him. And it was beautiful.*

Yumi sighed again. Why did these things have to be so difficult? Further ahead in the diary problems began to appear. And these problems bore the name of William Dunbar.

William was the same age as Yumi, and had fallen in love with her at first sight, even if she...she?

The girl pulled her MP3 player out from under a pillow and inserted the earphones. She selected a playlist of slow songs and, with the diary on her stomach, lay down with her eyes closed, letting the music carry her thoughts far away. Images of herself, of Ulrich, of William in a swimsuit. Ulrich saving

her life during one of their innumerable battles on Lyoko. William with a cruel expression on his face, the time when his mind had been possessed by X.A.N.A. and the boy had tried to kill her...

PEMMM!

Yumi jumped to her feet, screaming in fear.

“Hey, are you alright Yumi?” came Hiroki’s voice moments later, from the other side of the door.

“Y-Yeah. It’s ok, I...”

She looked down at the floor: the MP3 player had exploded, becoming a dark mound of molten goop. It stank of burnt plastic and was smoking.

“You what?!” her insistent brother asked, beating on the wooden surface of the closed door.

“I tripped Hiroki, that’s all. Calm down” she tried to reassure him.

“But I heard a bang! It was an explosion, I’m sure of it!”

“I’m telling you, everything’s fine. Go away!”

The earphones had exploded out of her ears. The MP3 player was ruined forever. It almost seemed like one of the old electrical attacks used by...

Yumi shook her head. No, that was impossible. It had to be a coincidence.

Odd regarded himself in a mirror as he made various poses and expressions; then he smeared a little gel over the

palms of his hands and applied them to his hair, modelling it into his usual style.

For a beautiful moment he continued to examine himself with a critical eye. He had put on a 'Desperate' T-Shirt, his favourite rock band, and a pair of jeans that had fallen victim to his paintbrush.

“Oh you heartbreaker” he said in satisfaction to his reflection, and tried his most dazzling smile. Nothing could go wrong: he was irresistible.

He had already wiped the incident with Kiwi from his mind. Ulrich had saved him in the nick of time and now he had a free evening to spend courting Eva Skinner. Aelita had told him that the girl would be taking supper with them in the Kadic cafeteria, so he knew she was somewhere on the campus.

Odd cautiously stuck his head out from the bathroom door and checked the corridor in both directions. The dormitory was deserted. Perfect.

He slipped away outside, his ears straining to hear the faintest hint of Jim's pounding footsteps. Passing the entrance doors he sped across the courtyard at breakneck speed.

There were no teachers patrolling the grounds: it was too cold and the snow was icing over. In all probability he would have better luck searching for Eva somewhere warm, maybe in the cafeterias. With a bit of luck he would find her alone.

Poor little thing, fervently wishing to have someone to speak to. Perhaps, to himself! In short, he would be waiting for her.

“Who’s there?”

Odd’s luck was not with him. It was Sissi, also too elegantly-dressed to be out for an innocent walk: she was wearing a black sleeveless top that was tied off behind her neck along with a skimpy miniskirt. Her skin was bluish from the cold.

“What a strange smell...” observed Odd, sniffing the surrounding air. “It’s like vegetables.”

“Smell?! Vegetables?! It’s my perfume, stupid! I was looking for Ulrich! And who are you dressed up for?”

“Eva” Odd answered, without thinking. Then, in a hurry, he added: “I need to ask her for...the notes...the lesson...”

Sissi smiled maliciously. “Yes yes, my foot! Someone wants to be friends with the beautiful American girl...”

Footsteps on the path. Boisterous laughter. Jim Morales? Out of instinct Odd seized Sissi by the arm and dragged her behind a bush.

“Hey! What are you doing? Leave me alone!” she shrieked.

“Sssssh!” he hissed back, a finger pressed up to his mouth.

They were close together, in a tight space, surrounded by the frost-covered leaves. Sissi was just a few centimetres from him and could not help blushing.

“What do you want to do, Odd?” she whispered.

The footsteps passed and he jumped back.

“Ehhhh? What’s going through your head? I didn’t want to do anything!”

He dusted the snow off his clothes. Now he had to come up with a plausible excuse: of course he could not tell the daughter of the principal that he had just escaped from the dormitories.

“Someone was coming and I didn’t want them to see us together” he improvised quickly.

Yes, a plausible excuse had just come to mind. Odd smiled and added: “What else? I have a reputation to defend. Of course I couldn’t let myself be seen with you all spruced-up in the snow like this. And wearing such awful perfume as well!”

There must have been some flaw in his otherwise perfect excuse, because Sissi became even redder...but with rage.

“Odd Della Robbia, I swear that I’ll make you suffer for this!” she screamed, running away.

Odd felt a pang of regret. Sissi was a silly goose, but perhaps this time he had gone too far.

Later he returned to his room and silently threw himself onto the bed. Ulrich was on the opposite side of the room, also lying down with his eyes open. His feet were raised up, supported against the wall.

Odd had wandered the school without picking up a trace of Eva, and had gained nothing whilst risking a personal en-

counter with the principal. It had not been his day. He had slunk back to the dormitory with his tail between his legs.

“Oh” he mumbled. “Thanks for today. With Kiwi I mean.”

Ulrich answered with a grunt. “Don’t mention it.”

“Hard day, eh?” Odd peeped furtively at his friend.

“Mmm.”

“Eh, don’t talk to me about it. Do you want to talk to me about it?”

Odd remained in silence. Not even he wanted to speak. But seeing his friend so despondent did not please him one bit. Ulrich was a blockhead, but he meant well. To see him so sad was really unsettling. Out of impulse he grabbed one of his slippers and threw it at his roommate’s head.

“Hey, what the heck did you do that for? Have you gone mad?”

“Ua-taaah!”

With a feline bound Odd jumped onto his friend’s bed, wielding a pillow over his head. Ulrich, however, was faster and blocked him in mid-air with his own pillow, before throwing a shoe back at him.

The pillows exploded and the two of them burst out laughing.

Woof! Woof! Woof!

Kiwi was on his twelfth circuit of the ‘Hiroki’s Bedroom Grand Prix’ and kept on gaining distance on his pursuers. That is, Hiroki. He curved across the *tatami* and leapt onto

the writing desk, shot under the wardrobe, spun round the last corner while nearly grazing the door and started his next lap. And not for an instant did he stop his wild barking.

“Kiwi! Stop!” the child yelled.

“Hiroki!” Yumi screamed suddenly. “Are you going to put a stop to this madhouse?”

She opened the bedroom door and Kiwi decided that the race was over and now was the time to head to the victor’s podium. He slipped between Yumi’s legs without stopping and scampered away.

“Oh, no!”

The little boy launched himself in pursuit of the dog, but in the heat of the moment his shoulder struck Yumi’s knees, and both of them ended up on the floor.

“Ow! Hiroki!”

“Kiwi’s escaping!” he exclaimed.

“But where would he go?” his sister panted, somewhat annoyed.

The answer was simple: the kitchen window.

The two of them had finished eating some time earlier, alone since their parents were at a friend’s house. Yumi had cleaned and washed their plates and then left the window open to air the house. Demonstrating surprising athletic prowess for a mutt such as himself, Kiwi jumped onto the kitchen bench, slalomed between the recently-cleaned burners and disappeared over the windowsill to be swallowed up in the evening darkness.

“Oh, no! We've got to get him back!” Hiroki exclaimed in alarm.

The girl shook her head, irritated. “You go after him, Hiroki. You agreed to take care of Kiwi. I'm staying here.”

Hiroki looked at her for an instant, his almond eyes contracted in two narrow fissures. “But Yumi, please!”

“I'm not discussing it! And I'd get moving fast if I were you. Goodness knows where Kiwi will end up otherwise.”

Hiroki hurled himself into motion and shuddered as he ran into the icy night air. The streetlights illuminated only a deserted road flanked by rows of letterboxes, gardens pressed up against gardens, cars parked beside the pavement. It was rather late by now and the interior lights of the houses were generally turned off.

Woof! Woof!

Kiwi was over there. Far along the road, on the left. Somewhere.

The city, by day, was a calm and bright place. Hiroki preferred it much more than Kyoto, the Japanese city in which he had been born. But till now he had never had cause to go about the streets at night, when it was dark and cold and lonely. The roads that he crossed every day with Yumi to go to school now had a different aspect, the shadows stretching across the bitumen like long, dark fingers.

Hurrying to chase after Kiwi, the boy arrived in the vicinity of the Academy. Just along and to the right was the gate to a villa called the Hermitage. Silence had descended on the

street, apart from the wind and the tinkling sound of empty cans as they rolled along the ground.

I've lost him, Hiroki thought in despair. *I've lost Kiwi.*

Suddenly, a man came out of a road that skirted around the side of the Hermitage. He was wearing a leather jacket and had his back turned. In the weak light of the streetlamps Hiroki could only barely make out his facial features. He tried not to make himself noticed: something about that man disturbed him and was causing him to shudder.

In that same instant, in the villa's garden, Kiwi began to bark, and soon howls, growls and other barks overlaid his own. They sounded rabid and ill-tempered.

Without hesitation, Hiroki scaled the Hermitage's gate and allowed himself to drop down the other side. He was small and slender, but agile like his sister. Once on the ground he looked around cautiously. Kiwi was no longer barking, but the other dogs were still growling.

The little boy hurled himself in that direction, so worried that he did not notice that in fact there was no road going around that side of the Hermitage. Where then, could that man have come out from? But it was an unimportant thought, after all: the person had already gone away. And right now he had someone else on his mind.

The grounds of the villa were deserted, and Hiroki fumbled in the dark for a while in search of Kiwi. Now the barking had stopped and the disturbing silence was wrapping around him like a cloak. Risking slipping he walked on the

layer of snow, approaching the garage that formed a low hut against the side of the villa and, finally, he heard something. It was the sound of breathing, rapid gasps that made him think of an animal struggling to get air into its lungs. And it was coming from a sad little bundle that had collapsed onto the ground.

It was Kiwi. And he was injured.

Grigory Nictapulus hurriedly covered the distance that separated him from his pickup, climbed aboard and slammed the door with enough strength to risk breaking it. He had recognised the little boy: Hiroki Ishiyama. And the little brat had nearly seen his face.

Only Grigory's training and infinite caution had saved him, but just at the last second. It had not been enough to put him on the slippery slope to ruin. He knew in advance that these kids were damnably cunning. So he had to pay even more attention.

The Magician was paying him to foresee the unforeseen.

4

A SPY IN THE SHADOWS



There was nothing interesting on television. Odd let the remote control fall onto the duvet and yawned. “If I carry on like this I risk falling asleep. And it’s only midnight!”

On the other side of the room Ulrich raised his head from the literature textbook. “You know what you could actually try doing? Studying...”

“Ehhhhh?” his friend stared at him disgustedly. “A superior mind such as mine does not need to study...”

Odd’s answer was interrupted by the trilling sound of Ulrich’s phone.

“Hello?” the boy answered. “Mmm. Mmm. Ok, I’m coming.”

He ended the call and started slipping on his shoes. Odd jumped to his feet: “Where are you going? You’re seriously not going to leave me here on my own are you?”

“It was Yumi. She sounded really worried, and she asked for me to run over to her place.”

“Worried? Why?”

Ulrich threw him a fleeting glance. “She didn’t say.”

Odd was now also pulling on his shoes. “I’d hate it if anything happened to Kiwi.”

“Has your superior mind forgotten, but you’re being punished, confined to quarters” Ulrich cut him off.

Odd weighed in his answer. “Yes, that’s true. But I’m only in trouble if someone sees me. I went out this afternoon and nothing happened.”

“Odd, you’re not putting so much as your nose out of this room! Far as I’m concerned, you’ve caused enough trouble already.”

“Oh, but of course, Daddy dearest. As you wish.”

Ulrich smiled in resignation and the two friends ran out through the door.

Kiwi was lying in Hiroki’s lap wrapped in a blanket: he was still breathing raggedly and his heartbeat was elevated. Odd hurled himself immediately at his wounded pet.

Hiroki looked at him through eyes swollen with tears. “I’m sorry Odd...I’m so sorry, I...”

Odd delicately lifted the blanket. Kiwi's squat body was covered in scratches, two of which had cut very deep. One of his ears had been bitten and the small dog trembled like a quivering leaf. Odd caressed him carefully, being careful not to apply pressure on his injuries. "What happened?"

Yumi, who had opened the door and was now hopping nervously from one foot to the other, explained.

Ulrich's eyes became like laser beams, his gaze cold enough to burn. "Congratulations Yumi, truly. Not only did you not want to take care of Kiwi, but you also let him escape. And if that was not enough you sent Hiroki off on his own to find him. Your little brother! At night! Wandering around the city!"

"I..." she tried to speak.

But Ulrich was so furious that he did not give her the chance. "If you had been together, perhaps you would have caught Kiwi five minutes before he was attacked by these dogs, and now he would not be injured, and perhaps..."

Yumi was not the type to silently stay put when confronted with such a string of accusations, even if she felt inside that there was some truth to them. Indeed, perhaps that was why she was now so irritated.

"Fine, go ahead and judge me!" she replied crossly. "Could you have done any better, huh? Mister Perfect, you..."

"SHUT IT, THE BOTH OF YOU!"

Odd was purple in the face and had yelled so loudly that Kiwi had yelped and Hiroki started in shock.

“SOMEONE HAS HURT KIWI BADLY AND I STILL DON’T KNOW WHAT HAPPENED!”

Then, after taking in a great breath to calm himself down, he continued in a softer tone: “Hiroki, where did you find him?”

“At...at the Hermitage.”

Suddenly the little boy remembered the man he had glimpsed from behind. There was no road running around that side of the Hermitage, and if there was no road...that meant the man had to have been coming out from the Hermitage.

Stammering, increasing troubled, Hiroki explained to them what had happened.

“An unknown man...” commented Yumi. “Perhaps he was looking for Aelita.”

“Maybe he has something to do with Hopper!” Ulrich exclaimed.

“We’ve got to go check.”

She nodded. “I’ll call Aelita, you handle Jeremy. We’ve all got to get to the Hermitage: maybe we can get to the bottom of this story.”

Ten minutes prior, Jeremy had been sleeping peacefully in his room at Kadic, watched over by the poster of Einstein that hung on the wall. Ten minutes later, with a heavy jacket pulled over his pyjamas and his round glasses worn crookedly on the end of his nose, he was bent face-down in the gar-

den of the Hermitage, a handheld torch illuminating the layer of snow that covered the ground.

Around him, like fireflies, shone the torches of his friends. Hiroki alone had remained at the Ishiyama residence, looking after poor Kiwi.

“Here!” Jeremy exclaimed suddenly. “Come and see.”

The frozen snow was not the best medium for showing up trace details, but at one point close to the garage, the thick blanket had been torn away and the mud underneath was ploughed with a tangle of paw prints. Dogs.

“My gosh, it was big!” commented Odd as he laid his hand onto one of the nearest prints. “Look, the claws have dug right into the earth! It must have been a real animal; it’s a miracle that Kiwi’s still alive!”

Jeremy examined the ground with scrupulous attention. “The tracks are confused, but if I’m correct there were at least two dogs, both of the same breed, though one was a little lighter: see how this print is less marked?”

“Stray dogs?” Ulrich ventured.

Jeremy shook his head, little convinced. “Do you see here, against the garage wall?”

He indicated to a crescent under the wall, where the mildew had been scraped away. “Shoes did that. And I’m willing to bet that whoever responsible was here with the dogs. Just like Hiroki said.”

“Dogs...” whispered Aelita. “Like the ones I heard barking last night, just like in my dream! Jeremy, I’m scared.”

Jeremy felt an impulse to strongly embrace her in his arms, but he held his ground. “Don’t worry Aelita. We’ll solve this mystery, you’ll see. And we’ll be here to protect you.”

Odd slipped through the illuminated corridors of the dormitories. Ulrich had already returned to Kadic some time ago, to avoid having to speak with Yumi, while he had insisted on accompanying the girl back to her house: he had wanted to check in on Kiwi.

Hiroki had dutifully disinfected and bandaged the invalid as best he could. Now that they were cleaned, the injuries did not seem so terrible. In just a few days he would be back to being the same joyful dog as ever.

“Odd! Della! Robbia!”

The boy jumped, a shiver running down the length of his back. Trembling, he turned around.

“Ji...Jim. Always a pleasure, my friend.”

Jim Morales’ muscular arms were crossed over his chest and he did not the least bit glad. “‘Friend’ my foot! Looks to me like you’re breaking the terms of your punishment.”

Odd’s mind raced ahead at full speed. “I’ve only been out for, ehm, a moment. To go to the bathroom.”

“Honestly! The bathrooms are in the other direction! You’ve been out of the school, my boy. At night! In spite of your punishment! That tip-off was right, it seems...”

Odd’s ear’s straightened suddenly. “Tip-off? What tip-off? Who blew the whistle on me?”

Jim fumbled with the collar of his polo shirt, clearing his throat. “Oh well, did I say tip-off? I mean a hunch...my intuition...”

“Jimbo” Odd interrupted. Calling him ‘Jimbo’ always had a certain effect, especially when the teacher had gotten himself muddled. “Who told you that I had left my room?”

“Nobody, I...”

The truth came home to Odd in a flash: Sissi Delmas, in a top and miniskirt, standing amidst the frozen bushes of the ground and yelling: “*I swear that I’ll make you suffer.*”

“It was Sissi, wasn’t it?”

“Uh, well. You tell me” the gymnastics teacher responded evasively. “In any case, that has no effect on this!” Jim suddenly retook control. “You’ve violated the rules, first by bringing an animal to Kadic and then by leaving the dormitories at night. Therefore, by the powers vested in me by...erm, the principal, I declare you...”

“That girl will pay for this” Odd whispered.

“Watch it! I declare you to be in punishment! For a full WEEK! Now get to your room immediately or I’ll make it a fortnight!”

Odd’s only option was to obey.

While Odd was returning to his room, disheartened at being placed under house arrest, in Washington DC, capital of the United States of America, it was more or less nine in the evening.

The office did not enjoy a view of one of the city's great monuments, like the Washington obelisk, the Capitol building or the enthroned statue of President Lincoln. It was like any other office, located inside one of so many suburban skyscrapers, all equal, anonymous grey buildings. But that did not mean that the person who occupied this office was of no importance. Quite the contrary.

When the phone rang, the woman seated behind the desk answered immediately with a dry voice: "Yes."

On the other end of the line was Maggie, her secretary. "Ma'am, I'm sorry to disturb you, but there is a call for you. From France."

The woman, codenamed Dido, made herself more comfortable on her revolving armchair and checked out of the corner of her eye the long row of clocks hanging over the door. One for each of the major capitals of the world. At this moment it was after three in the morning in France. For someone to call at this hour, implied a certain urgency.

"Maggie, put them through to me" she made up her mind at last, in the meantime pressing a button on the telephone that ensured the line was not being monitored.

The voice that came down the length of the cable was male, deep. And embarrassed.

"Ma'am..."

"Agent Lone Wolf. It's been some time."

"Yes Ma'am, I felt you ought to know what's happened in the computer science unit. They've turned something up."

The 'computer science unit' consisted of a number of slaved computers that day and night monitored all searches made on the World Wide Web, hunting for suspicious words or phrases. It was an immense job, laborious, illegal. And more often than not, useless.

“Go ahead. We're on a secure line.”

“This afternoon we detected a search made on a private Intranet. Someone was trying to obtain information first on Franz Hopper, and then Waldo Schaeffer, who are in fact the same person...”

Dido sighed. Franz Hopper. Again.

The case of Hopper was over ten years old, but she did not need to check any dossier to refresh her memory. At the time she had been a young, promising official at the beginning of her career and the Hopper case had been her first, not to say her only, failure.

“Thank you for informing me, Agent” she said.

The voice on the end of the telephone cleared his throat. “I apologise, ma'am, but that isn't everything. The search was made on the internal network of...Kadic Academy.”

Dido could not resist striking her fist against the surface of the desk. Franz Hopper and Kadic together: a dangerous mix. Extremely dangerous.

“Very well, I see. I want a man assigned to work through Kadic's communications. Telephone calls, internal searches, Internet searches. Everything. The past two months up till

today. And I want a squad prepped to deploy, in case of emergencies.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“It might be something innocuous. A clerk reorganising the archives or something of that nature. But it’s better not to run the risk.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Dido ended the call without saying another word and sat immobile next to the telephone. A part of her, after all, had been hoping for this case to be reopened. It was a chance to turn her single failure into a great success.

The next morning, Jeremy and the others met by the coffee machine. Only Odd was missing: he had passed by two minutes previously, accompanied by Jim Morales who was following him from close behind, and had just enough to direct a single despairing look at his friends.

“I knew they would catch him...” Ulrich had observed as he watched them pass. “We’d best go too guys: lessons will be starting.”

Jeremy was on his feet close to Aelita: they both had eyes that were black-rimmed from tiredness. “I think the only solution is to put the Hermitage under observation.”

“Do you mean organise some kind of guard duty?” Yumi asked.

“Actually I was thinking along the lines of closed-circuit television surveillance” Jeremy clarified. “I can build the

cameras here. Last night I went back to the factory and checked: just about all the components I need are there. We then place them around the house and from the computer in my room I can monitor them all. So if by chance this man decides to return, we will have an image of them. And then we will be able to..."

"Report him to the police" a pleased Yumi finished for him. "Right?"

Jeremy remained absent-minded. "More or less."

Aelita smiled. "But isn't your computer dismantled and stored in a big box? Didn't you say that you would only keep the laptop for your schoolwork?"

"Actually, I seem to recall something like that myself!" Ulrich sniggered. "'With Lyoko gone I'm done with computer science. It's better this way'...And you said it in such a solemn voice too! He he!"

Jeremy blushed. "But that was before, this is an emergency! I'll reassemble everything tonight. If someone is searching for secrets of the Hermitage under our noses, then it serves us best to use every piece of technology at our disposal to flush him out and gain some understanding."

Jeremy was not the only student at Kadic to anxiously look forward to Professor Hertz's lessons. Susan Hertz was in fact a most beloved teacher, because she did not limit herself to the educational curriculum, instead incorporating any scientific subject, from DNA and computers to space travel, us-

ing examples and experiments that always fired the imaginations of all her pupils. Every lesson was a new discovery.

Except today everything seemed completely different. In fact the professor did not even say hello to the students and instead went directly to her desk, seating herself with a frowning expression and removed the curriculum from her folder.

“Let’s see. Open your books to page forty-eight. Nicolas, would you start reading?”

Nicolas looked perplexedly at his best friend Herve, who was also his roommate. Together they were Sissi’s two “bodyguards”, but Herve was the science expert. And during lessons Professor Hertz normally focused her attentions on him and Jeremy, the two most brilliant students, allowing Nicolas to sleep in peace.

Hertz cleared her throat and fixed Nicolas with an annoyed stare. “Is there a problem Nicolas?”

The boy roused himself. “No, no, miss.” Then he rose, opened the book and began to read aloud: “By the early 1930s scientists could consider themselves to be at a good point in the comprehension of matter. Chadwick’s discovery of the neutron seemed to have revealed all the mysteries that had previously surrounded the structure of the atom...”

Jeremy whispered to Aelita: “What the devil happened?”

“What do you mean?” she replied, raising an eyebrow.

“Look at the professor. It’s not like her, to just sit there like that. When has Hertz left a student to read the textbook and

said that was enough? Hertz has never followed the curriculum, always introduces her lessons, always...”

“...brought the number of known elementary particles to four...”

Jeremy was not the only to feel out-of-step. The whole class was looking around, somewhat lost.

Worried that he would have to keep reading for the entire lesson, Nicolas managed to deliver a kick under the table at Herve, who cleared his throat and also rose to his face. “Ehm, Professor?”

“Yes Herve?”

“I apologise for asking this, but...are you feeling well?”

The woman raised her head over the book, her face expressionless.

“You see” Jeremy confirmed in a low voice to Aelita. “It’s strange.”

“I’m perfectly fine Herve, thank you. And Jeremy, I would be very grateful if you ceased chatting with your friend. Another word and you will be sent out of the class.”

Jeremy sent outside of the classroom in punishment? Such an event had never occurred in the history of Kadac.

“Very well, Nicolas.” Hertz exhorted “If you could continue please. Thank you.”

Nicolas held back a sigh and started to read again. After a short while a hand rose above the desks.

“Yes dear?” Professor Hertz asked in a strangely sweet tone.

Eva Skinner rose to her feet, like a magnet drawing the attention of Odd and the greater part of the male student body.

“Excuse me Professor,” she began. “but I don’t yet understand what elementary particles actually are.”

“But of course dear” Professor Hertz smiled. “I’ll explain immediately.”

Jeremy was still brooding over the threat of being forced out of the classroom when Aelita jabbed him with her elbow and said: “Have you noticed? She’s strange too, not just Hertz. Yesterday she was struggling to enunciate words and today she doesn’t sound the least bit foreign. Her French is perfect.”

Jeremy nodded and began observing Eva, intrigued.

When the lesson had ended, Professor Hertz shut herself in her office and slumped back against the door. Then she removed her glasses and rested a hand against her forehead.

Teaching was always difficult, it demanded concentration and engagement with the subject material, but it was all the more challenging when one’s head was obstinately set in a tizzy. It was all Jeremy’s fault, and in truth she was glad to have scolded him in class, for once. He was to blame, and his speeches on supercomputers and Franz Hopper. It was fortunate that she had thought of placing Waldo Schaeffer’s dossier in the care of the principal. She knew Jeremy well enough to feel that he would have stopped at nothing to get his hands on those papers. And in so doing risk calling down

genuine calamity. Delmas, however, understood the complexity of the situation and could be trusted to guard the document with discretion.

Despite this, however, she did not feel at peace: perhaps she was mistaken about everything. And that history had been marching forward for far too long.

Toc toc.

“Yes?” Hertz burst out, starting.

“It’s me” answered a female voice. It was Eva. Eva Skinner.

“Ah yes, come on in dear. Do you wish to speak to me? Go right ahead.”

As the door opened the professor flaunted a wide smile. The problem of Hopper would have to wait for now.

Missus Marguerite Della Robbia arrived home carrying a precariously balanced stack of packages and carrier bags that rose above the top of her head.

The day was bright and lukewarm, making her wish she could go for a walk: it was just a shame that she had to be back at work in half an hour.

Laying everything on the table she looked around perplexedly. Something was different from an hour ago, when she had rushed out to make a quick dash to the supermarket. It only took her a second to discern what was wrong: the sofa cushions had been moved. She had arranged them in their usual position the previous evening, before retiring to bed.

And, before leaving the house, when she had checked for herself that the lights were out and the windows shut, the cushions had still been where she had left them, the cheerful pattern of red flowers on their covers downplaying the dark leather skin of the sofa that her husband loved so much.

Her husband: perhaps Robert had returned from work early? Then again no, he would certainly have let her know. And later in the day he had a meeting scheduled, so he would not be returning to the house until late.

Nevertheless, Marguerite called aloud: "Robert, are you here? Honey?"

No answer came.

"I'm imagining things" she murmured in a low voice, once again occupying herself with the shopping.

She had just stored the frozen spinach in the freezer when the telephone began to ring. Another oddity: no-one ever called the house at this hour. She ran to answer it. Perhaps it was Odd, but that would have been unusual: her son almost never called home. Except for when he had gotten himself into trouble. Somewhat breathless she reached the bedroom, picked up the telephone from the bedside table and finally answered it: "Hello?"

And then: "Hello?!"

The line had not disconnected: Marguerite could hear a rustling sound though the handset. "What is this, a joke? Ha ha. Very funny."

But deep down inside she did not feel so calm. She was not an easily impressionable woman, out of necessity, with as clumsy a husband as Robert and an uncontrollable son in Odd. But that quiet rustling, and the sound of withheld breathing, was beginning to unnerve her.

In a flash the disturbed sofa cushions came into context. This was no joke: there was someone in the house with her!

With a start she flung the telephone receiver to the floor and hurled herself into the next room. And then she saw the shadow.

The shadow sprang back, jumped through the living room window and disappeared into the grass of the meadow.

Missus Della Robbia's howls echoed off the walls of the house. In the kitchen, her shopping lay scattered across the floor. Yellow liquid dripped from two broken eggs onto the tiles.

5

SCREWDRIVERS, CAMERAS AND A NEW SECRET



“Aelita, could you pass me that screwdriver?”

Ulrich had climbed up under the awning of the Hermitage’s garage, precariously balanced on an old and rickety ladder. He took the tool that the girl handed him and secured the last two wires from which the surveillance camera was suspended. It was grey and had the dimensions of a small tennis ball, with a small black hole in the centre like the pupil of a human eye. “Are you sure these gadgets of yours are going to work Jeremy?”

“I’m certain that they’ll work!” Jeremy answered from inside the garage, and he flipped up the horizontally-pivoted car door to come out.

The door only lightly glanced against the ladder, but that was enough: Aelita lost hold of it and Ulrich, unbalanced, fell backwards onto her.

“Ah! Are you alright?”

“Well I’ll be just fine, if you could get off me.”

“Sorry, I didn’t do that on purpose” Jeremy accounted for himself.

“Ha, ha, ha! No worries!” Ulrich answered, helping Aelita to pick herself up.

“Why are you laughing?”

“Because of the clown pants Jeremy. They’re just...so you!”

Aelita stifled a chortle with her hands so that Jeremy did not notice they were teasing him. In preparation for the afternoon’s work, he had donned a huge pair of dungarees procured from goodness-knew-where that truly left him looking like a clown. The boy removed his glasses to clean them against his T-shirt and returned them to their place.

“In any case,” he grouched “these surveillance cameras are gems. They can visualise in the infrared spectrum and broadcast directly to my computer using TLS cryptography.”

“Ok, ok Einstein, slow down” Ulrich interrupted him. “The important thing is that they work.”

“Hey, guys!” Yumi called to them. “Instead of chatting, could you come and give me a hand here?”

She was in front of the entrance door, where a small terraced porch reached by several steps overlooked the garden and provided enough shade to cover a table and a small rocking chair whose cushions were torn and ripped. Yumi was standing on top of the chair and trying to screw another camera to the doorjamb.

Ulrich approached her. “Sure, wait there, I’ll help you.”

He climbed up next to her, his arms practically embracing her while he held firmly onto the small screwdriver.

“I’m almost done” Yumi said in a whisper.

“It doesn’t matter, I’m just glad to be here.”

Ok, it was a stupid thing to say, Ulrich thought, but he and Yumi had been quarrelling too much lately.

Jeremy came up the porch stairs, leaping three steps in a single bound.

“Could you guys do with another screwdriver?”

Ulrich turned with a start. “For pity’s sake, we’re fine...”

But the movement had been too sharp and once again he lost his balance, ending up face-down on the cushions. By his calculations this was his second fall in as many minutes, and just when he had the chance to spend a few moments alone with Yumi.

Ulrich picked himself up into a sitting position and stared Jeremy straight in the face.

“You’re my personal jinx today, you know that?”

Aelita lay on her bed, listlessly try to read a book that Yumi had leant her. Darkness had fallen outside and a wind was blowing against the face of Kadic’s dormitories, filling the air with gusts and lamenting moans.

Giving up, Aelita closed the book and switched on the small television set that rested on her desk: a stupid quiz show was playing. But perhaps her father would have enjoyed programmes like this: he seemed to have been skilled at riddles and clues. And maybe her mother as well...assuming she was still alive.

Aelita shook her head and turned up the volume of the TV, hoping it would drown out her thoughts.

The show’s presenter was a man in his thirties, with a neatly-trimmed beard and hair styled and gelled up in a comical fashion, with an upright banana-shaped forelock. He was smiling stiffly in a sparkling suit of green brilliantine and kept directing his attention to the prettier contestants.

“Well, our friends at home!” he announced eventually. “As you know, this is a very special evening...”

The image onscreen was framed in such a way as to draw attention to his prominent eyes, of such a clear blue that they brought to mind the eyes of huskies: the colour of ice.

“...there is in fact here with us now...”

Aelita froze, lost in those eyes. And then, for a moment, it seemed to her that...

She roused herself. No, that was impossible. The eyes of the presenter had vibrated, the pupils oscillating as if suffering from signal loss, and a symbol had momentarily appeared in their place: the concentric circles of the Eye of X.A.N.A.

“X.A.N.A.?” she whispered.

The television exploded.

Screaming in fear, Aelita slipped off the bed, her elbow striking against the floor. X.A.N.A. had returned! She breathed deeply, two or three times, calming herself. Avoiding the broken fragments of glass that were now scattered over the floor, she picked up the television’s remote control, now emitting a thin coil of smoke. It was obviously no longer functional, but the inbuilt LEDs were still illuminated: neither had the room’s ceiling light blown out.

If a similar thing had occurred not so long ago, Aelita would have hurriedly called her friends and together they would have made tracks for the abandoned factory beneath which hid ‘the underground castle’, the secret laboratories that housed the supercomputer, and would have entered into Lyoko to deactivate one of the towers.

X.A.N.A. always followed the same *modus operandi*: activate a tower on Lyoko and through it bring about all kinds of disasters in the real world. And these would not end until she entered into the tower and restored everything to normality, taking advantage of the gift her father had left her: *Code*

Lyoko, a piece of coding within the towers that she alone could activate, and so neutralise X.A.N.A.'s powers.

But things had changed: X.A.N.A. no longer existed, and Aelita's father had in fact sacrificed his life to stop it. So the explosion could not have been the work of the Artificial Intelligence. It was nothing. She had to calm herself.

Wearing her slippers, Aelita furtively left her room and headed towards the ground-floor coffee machines. She needed something hot to drink.

At times Jeremy imagined the Kadic dormitories to be an immense squatted-down animal. A dormant monster built from wardrobes and beds, walls of cement and neon lights.

The dormitory had its rhythms: it roused early each morning and soon was roaring with students running to the bathrooms and dressing for lessons. Then it dozed during the school hours and resumed activity in the afternoon, when the long corridors resounded with cries of laughter. And now, in his room, Jeremy felt that the Kadic animal was settling down for a good night's sleep. The voices outside were low, the only footsteps a quiet, rapid tapping as students avoided Jim Morales making his rounds.

Jeremy was sitting in front of his computer, the faithful computer that once again occupied ninety percent of the available space on his desk. The remaining ten percent was taken up by his laptop computer, also powered up. On both screens, images were cycling quickly from the cameras set

up around the Hermitage, the home of Aelita's father. For the moment everything was completely quiet.

"Can I come in?" a voice enquired from outside of the room.

Ulrich rushed inside without waiting for an answer and closed the door behind him.

"Jim's become obsessed" he panted irritably. "He nearly caught me."

"How's Odd?"

"He's in our room watching some lame concert on DVD. Another five minutes of that music and my head would have burst. So what about you? What's happening with the Hermitage?"

Jeremy showed him the screens. "No problems, for now. The only thing troubling me now is staying awake all night: if we intend to continue this it's going to get difficult."

Ulrich lay down on his friend's bed and picked up a periodical lying open on the pillow. He put it down just as quickly. "Blegh, protons. How can you read this stuff? Anyway, I can stay and keep you company, if you're alright with that. Odd can have the room to himself for now."

"Mmm. So how's Yumi?"

It was a strange question, coming from Jeremy. Between himself, Ulrich, and Odd there was an unspoken pact in place: he admitted to seizing up around girls, and accepted (and appreciated!) their observations on who were the belles of Kadic's female student body. But none of them ever dis-

cussed, in a serious manner, the people most important to them: Aelita in Jeremy's case, Yumi with Ulrich, and whom-ever was Odd's current girl of the moment.

But the fact was that events were taking their toll on Ulrich, and Jeremy could no longer keep dancing around the subject.

"Yumi's fine, as far as I know" Ulrich grumbled. "We've not spoken much lately."

"I've noticed as much" Jeremy said. "But why?"

Ulrich was not a particularly talkative type, but in truth the evenings were long and Jeremy had suddenly noticed that his friend had too many thoughts swarming around inside his head. Perhaps he needed to confide in someone, just to vent his feelings or seek some intelligent advice.

It was exactly like that: strangely, Ulrich had just as great a desire to speak as Jeremy had to listen. And, one after another, words poured out that illuminated him on his friend's emotional situation. What he had said to Yumi when she had refused to look after Kiwi, and what she had said in return. The way things never seemed to succeed between them. Never.

"An ugly story" Jeremy said at the end. "But it seems to me that you could resolve things quite easily."

He smiled as Ulrich raised his eyes to the sky: according to him for some things there were no solutions. And always, when there was a solution, it was never easy. Jeremy knew the feeling well.

“And what would your answer be? I’m all ears” Ulrich muttered, sceptical.

Jeremy tensed his shoulders and looked at the floor. “Well for example, you could tell her the truth.”

Ulrich looked him in the face. “And that would be?”

Jeremy sighed. It was a cruel joke in the history of love: when you were caught in the middle of it, you understood nothing from nothing. But from an external perspective, it all seemed crystal clear.

“That would be” he explained “that you can’t carry on in this situation where the two of you claim to be just friends, when you and everyone else know it’s something more. How long has it been now?”

Ulrich closed his eyes in concentration. “How long since when?”

“Since Yumi told you that she preferred for the two of you to just stay friends.”

Ulrich scratched his head, trying to remember. “Oh, about a century now.”

“Exactly. And since then the two of you have continued to love each other very mu...” Jeremy blushed. “In short, you’ve not stopped. And now you don’t have it in you to carry this false pretence any further, but you’ve not had the courage to say as much to her.”

Ulrich glanced sidelong at his friend, with a smile. “Know it all...”

“This isn’t easy for me you know” Jeremy replied, smiling in turn. “It’s more difficult than trying to repair a quantum supercomputer.”

“So I should go talk to her. To apologise at least. To make... Jeremy look!”

“What is it?”

“What the heck’s happening on the monitor?”

The two of them turned. A man wrapped in a long coat had leapfrogged over the Hermitage’s gate and was making his way towards the porch.

“Who is that?” asked Ulrich in a croaking voice.

“Wait a moment, I’ll switch to Camera #2” Jeremy said.

The image changed, capturing the intruder from above the doorjamb: the camera that Yumi had set up.

The man was very young, with a smattering of hairs on his chin that hinted at a small beard and a cluster of freckles on his nose. His hair was the colour of dark copper.

“If you ask for my professional opinion, he doesn’t seem very dangerous” Ulrich said, but Jeremy was not listening to him.

He enlarged the image and adjusted the orientation of three cameras to cover the same zone. “Do you see that? He’s not tried to ring the bell. And he’s acting suspiciously.”

This was certainly true. Checking that there was no-one around, the young man moved to the back of the house.

“Quick, follow him Jeremy!”

“That’s what I’m trying to do. I didn’t think of building self-propelled cameras.”

On the video, the boy stopped against the garage, in roughly the same spot as where they had found the footprints. He rested his back against the wall and remained immobile for some time, his eyes closed.

“What’s he doing?” Ulrich asked.

“I don’t know” Jeremy answered. “But I don’t like it.”

“Well in any case, he’s leaving. Look.”

The boy was now going towards the gate. He peeped into the street to confirm that there was no-one passing, then jumped over the fencing onto the pavement and ran off down the length of the street, far out of the range of Jeremy’s camera.

Aelita had spent several hours in her bed trying to fall asleep and, from time to time, staring at the burnt-out television set that blindly watched her from the desk. Eventually she had managed to fall into a dark and confused drowsiness, but when the telephone brought her back to reality she had the impression of having not slept at all. “Yes? Hi Jeremy. Has something happened?” she answered after several rings.

“Yes. Ulrich and I have spotted the intruder. We seem to be dealing with a young man.”

Aelita jumped onto the bed, falling prey to panic. “What??”

“Relax” Jeremy tried to reassure her. “He’s already left. He only stopped for a few moments and well...he didn’t look particularly dangerous in any case.”

Aelita perceived that Ulrich was grumbling something and Jeremy added: “Yes, that’s true. He seemed utterly hopeless. But we kept our eyes on him the whole time. And now we know to be on our guard.”

The thought that she would soon be spending whole nights patrolling the grounds of the Hermitage did little to calm Aelita. After all, even if the mysterious man was hopeless, his dogs had nearly torn Kiwi to pieces.

“I’ll come over to your room straight away” she came to a decision at last.

Jeremy mused on it for several seconds, and then said: “Let’s leave it for now, you need to sleep. But there is something you could do for me. I’ve sent an MMS to you with a picture of this boy: can you study it and call me if you recognise him?”

“Mmm” Aelita nodded. “I’ll call you right back.”

The message had arrived during the call. She opened it and immediately felt faint. That face...the nose, those eyes, the freckles. It was a face that she felt she knew! But that meant...she had to lie down for several seconds to prevent the darkness closing in on her. Then she suddenly opened the door and raced towards Jeremy’s room.

He was hungry. Profoundly and viciously hungry.

During a mission, Grigory Nictapolus ate only the absolute minimum required to keep his strength up, but not enough to ever be satisfied. Food would only lower his focus. But when the mission was concluded he would find a restaurant, one of those places that served breaded steak fingers flavoured with barbeque sauce, and finally sate his stomach. It was his way of celebrating.

His reconnoitre of the Della Robbia residence that morning had been fruitful despite the lady of the house's early return. And that was not a particularly worrying development either. Unforeseen events always happened. What was important was being able to manage them.

Now though, this boy who was stumbling around the Hermitage was as welcome as cheese on macaroni. The little kids had assumed that he was the exact same person spotted by Hiroki, and their every last suspicion of Grigory's very existence would soon disappear.

Keeping one eye on the surveillance cameras he had installed in Aelita's room at Kadic, he opened his video archive and scrolled back several minutes. There.

The image on the girl's phone was too blurred for him to be able to identify the face of the intruder, but the grounds of the Hermitage was also under the watchful gaze of Grigory's own mini-cameras, and those had supplied much better images.

That said, he had to be mindful of the quiet boy with the glasses, Jeremy: in a single afternoon he had built and in-

stalled a closed-circuit surveillance system superior to those of many firms that specialised in the field. But Grigory's equipment was on a whole other level, and not for an instant had he feared that his bugs would be discovered. Nor his presence in the neighbourhood surrounding the Hermitage realised.

On the monitor he enlarged an image of the boy with the freckles and opened his digital dossier.

Using the same software so beloved of half the world's forensic science forces, he commenced a search based on the somatic parameters of the boy's features, and on the image a series of red dots appeared, corresponding to the cheekbones, the eyes, the base of the nose and the mouth. On the other half of the monitor photographs of faces began to scroll past, with growing velocity.

After several minutes the computer flashed up the legend: *NO MATCH FOUND.*

Grigory could have instructed it to cross-reference against the databases of the French police, the FBI and their Gallic counterpart, the DCRI, but it would be a lengthy task regardless. Therefore he limited himself to running a revised search of his internal archive, but allowing for age to be factored in as a variable. If there was a photo in his dossiers of the boy as a child, the initial search would have missed it. Yes, the computer could run the second search.

Ten minutes later there finally appeared the result he was looking for. An application for enrolment at Kadic Academy

dated 1992. The small square-sided photo that accompanied the form had little in common with the boy lurking around the Hermitage, but the computer was declaring it a 98% match, practically a certainty.

Name: Richard Dupuis. Stamped at the bottom of the document were the words: *Assigned to Class D.*

Class D...that reminded Grigory of something. And this time it only took five minutes to give shape and substance to that memory.

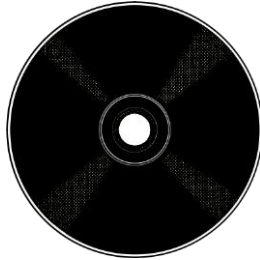
It was a group photo. Kadic Academy's Class D of 1992, the young students posing for the camera. On the left, there stood a younger Jim Morales. And to the right, was Professor Franz Hopper.

And there, from the front row and on her knees, Aelita Hopper smiled widely. And next to her was that little boy, Richard, with an unmistakable head of corroded copper hairs.

Grigory regarded the displays wired to his mini-cameras. Onscreen could be seen Aelita, who had returned to her room and slipped into a deep sleep. His mouth twisted into a sarcastic sneer: "You really don't remember him, do you kid? You should. He was your classmate for two years. But you're going to remember those two years soon enough."

6

A TRAP, OR TWO



In the cafeteria Mexican bean salad had been served and now Ulrich's stomach was oscillating between satisfaction and restlessness.

"Oooff!" Odd panted as he massaged his own stomach. "Well that was just what I needed."

"Well at least you avoided eating a triple portion, for once" Ulrich commented as he peered around, searching for Yumi.

"Until Rosa stops serving this disgusting healthy stuff yeah! And now we've got two hours of art. At least the beans give me a reason to sleep through it."

"Sorry Odd, I've gotta go" Ulrich cut him short, leaving his friend alone at the table.

Through the windows he had seen Yumi crossing the grounds surrounded by a small group of friends. Perhaps it

was not the best moment in which to approach her, but after what he and Jeremy had discussed the night before he could not wait any longer.

He reached them almost running. “Yumi! Sorry, do you have a second?”

The other girls began to laugh: they always found it comical that a hard-boiled person like Yumi was always hanging out with a younger boy.

Yumi struck them silent with a glare. “I’ll see you guys later.” Then, once she and Ulrich were alone, she burst out: “So what’s so important? I’ve only got a minute.”

The boy scratched the back of his neck, embarrassed. It suddenly seemed to him that the collar of his T-Shirt was tightening around his throat, starving him of oxygen. His stomach felt like the beans were readying for a spirited game of soccer in his small intestine.

“What’s wrong, cat got your tongue?” Yumi continued, losing her patience.

“I, well. So here we are. Great.”

“My compliments, that was a beautiful speech. Did you prepare it in advance?” she said. But now she was smiling.

Ulrich tried again: “Yumi, I’ve not been very kind with you lately.”

“That’s putting it mildly.”

“It’s not just that. You’re right though. Of course. But, that aside, I wanted to apologise. I’ve been really mean.”

“Yes.”

“And bad-tempered.”

“Also true.”

She definitely was not making things easy for him. And now the most difficult part of all was coming. *Yumi, you and I are more than just friends. You know it as well as I do. Do you want...want what? You see. I mean. Yumi...*

“I’ve been mean to you Yumi. I’m sorry. I swear it.”

She extended her hand and her fingers brushed against his cheek, which ignited in flames at the brief contact.

“Let’s let it be. I’ve been crosser than normal myself. We can just put it behind us as if it never happened, ok?”

She made to leave, but Ulrich moved to block her.

Yumi, you and I are more than just friends. Come on, it was just one sentence, but did it have to be so hard to say it?

And at that moment, Sissi Delmas angled in towards them, inevitably accompanied by Herve and Nicolas. With an industrial-strength dose of confidence, she draped an arm over Ulrich’s shoulders, the other gripping him around the waist. Then she squared off with Yumi, looking the other girl in the eye. “Uh, what a dark expression. You should be gentler with our Ulrich. He’s very sensitive, you know that? He needs an understanding girl to take care of...”

“Sissi!” Ulrich yelled in annoyance as he distanced himself from her. “Yumi and I were talking!”

“Well, I have classes I should be in” Yumi cut him off.

Ulrich was about to add something in protest, when Sissi took his hand. “Herve, Nicolas, you can go too. I’ll join up

with you later. Ulrich, what would you say to us studying together for the rest of the afternoon? And you're so good at science, you could help me!"

"I've never been good at science!" he burst out. "If you need help, go ask Jeremy."

Yumi turned her back and bade Ulrich farewell with a wave of the hand and a half-smile. He watched her black hair rippling in the breeze as she walked away.

Sissi pinched his cheek. "Look at that, we're all alone together, just you and me."

Maybe it was the beans' fault, but Ulrich's stomach suddenly felt like it was being gripped by a vice.

Monsieur Chardin was walking between the desks with his hands folded behind his back and loudly pontificating on the subjects of film, cinematography, and the mysteries of decoupage.

Aelita snorted in frustration: that afternoon the others would be heading off to the factory to prepare a trap for the Hermitage's intruder, but she had promised Tamiya that she would help her with the audio track for a film. Tamiya and her friend Milly were the pint-sized staff of the school newspaper, and they also produced videos which they published on the paper's website. For ages the two munchkins had been pestering Aelita for help, and she had not had the heart to deny them. Sissi had already cornered that market.

When the bell rang, she approached Odd. “So, are you meeting up with the others?”

“He’s coming with me” Jim Morales growled, appearing at the classroom door. “Since he’s being punished, the principal has decided he’s going to be doing some odd jobs as community service. So he’ll be helping me put the gymnasium in order.”

Odd raised his eyes to the heavens in dismay.

Ulrich laughed sarcastically as he passed by. “Work hard, ‘old boy’, we’ll see you at dinner.”

Jeremy and Ulrich said hello in passing to Aelita as Tamiya dragged her away. The little girl was laughing happily from under her Rasta-braided cornrows, and Aelita in turn was trying to smile...and not cry.

“Well, that was amusing!” Ulrich laughed, waving goodbye.

“You’re heartless” Jeremy chuckled.

Together they headed through the grounds of Kadic, in the direction of the abandoned factory.

The vast building occupied the whole of an islet a short distance from the Academy and was connected to dry land by an old bridge. When the factory had been mothballed, the road leading to the bridge had been blocked off, so now there were only three means of getting there, and all involved travelling underground: from the Hermitage, through a long tunnel planned out and built by Franz Hopper, or via the sewers,

gaining access either through Kadic's boiler room or a manhole in the grounds.

The two boys chose, as always, the manhole. Even if the smell was awful, it was the surest way of gaining access without being seen. Together they dug into the snow and, when it had been exposed, they raised the heavy iron disc between them and slipped into the shaft, closing the entrance over their heads as they went. Then they descended a narrow ladder, going hand-over-hand down metal rungs driven into the cement walls, and took a last deep breath to fill their lungs, before entering into the stench of the sewers.

Everywhere, on the manhole cover, and on the rungs of the ladder, there appeared a strange symbol and inscription, the meaning of which Jeremy had never ascertained: *Green Phoenix*.

Reaching the horizontal tunnel, Jeremy seized his scooter and Ulrich his skateboard from where they had been left resting against the wall. The stink in the sewer was strong enough to all but paralyse someone: for some time the group had decided it best to keep means of transportation on hand, so as to speed things up. Racing ahead they eventually reached another ladder leading up through the roof. Climbing up, they finally emerged onto the factory's access bridge.

"Uff!" gasped Ulrich when they came into the open air. "Could you invent a superdeodorant or something for that place? It gets worse down there every time."

“A fragrant sewer? Don’t you think that would be a bit suspicious?”

The bridge was supported over the river by two tall pairs of metal columns from which the suspension cables were strung. It somewhat reminded Jeremy of the Brooklyn Bridge, only far smaller and in great disrepair. Entering the factory, they slid down to the ground floor via some old ropes that still hung from the ceiling. It was a huge environment, a complex tangle of cement, girders, and square windows from which much of the glass had been smashed.

Now they approached the elevator, a sort of industrial container that descended underground at the prompting of a dangling control box.

“This brings back memories, eh?” Ulrich murmured.

Jeremy did not answer. Since discovering that it was possible to reach the old factory from Kadic, they had many times covered the same route, always in haste, and always with the anguish of monsters to be stopped or friends in peril.

It had been dangerous, at times far too dangerous. But it had also been their great adventure: now that it was ended, and the supercomputer deactivated, it seemed to Jeremy that something important was missing from their lives.

The first sublevel, the supercomputer’s control room, was an immense space illuminated by a dim green light. The centre of the room was dominated by a metal ring that jutted up about thirty centimetres from the floor: this was the holo-

graphic display that allowed Jeremy to oversee his friends' activities on Lyoko, monitoring their positions relative to those of the monsters. Beside the projector there was the revolving armchair of the command console, with the associated monitors and keyboard mounted on the end of a huge mechanical arm.

Jeremy completely ignored the computer, now sad and darkened, and opened the door of a cupboard in which a little of everything was stored. And then suddenly he began to select circuit boards and robotic components, data cards and cables.

Ulrich squatted down nearby and pawed through all the technological rubbish.

"Doesn't it upset you?" he asked his friend.

Jeremy looked at him with an interrogative air. "What?"

"Shutting down the supercomputer?"

Jeremy sighed and for a moment felt his eyes pinch shut behind his glasses. "Honestly, I try not to think about it. All the nights that I spent down here, alone, back when I was trying to materialise Aelita into our world. And all the times when I tried to help you guys on Lyoko..."

"Yeah. You were the mind, and we were the arm wielding the sword!"

Ulrich rose to his feet and mimed his way through a pair of pencak silat katas, armed with an imaginary sword. Jeremy could remember the real thing as if it were yesterday: Ulrich the Lyoko Warrior, his special skills, the contests be-

tween him, Odd and Yumi to see who could kill the most monsters.

“Deactivating the supercomputer was like killing a part of myself” he said conclusively. “But we had no other option: it was too dangerous.”

“And it would have been pretty useless even if we had kept it online...”

For a moment Jeremy’s mind returned to that afternoon of some days ago, when the bulbs in his bedroom had exploded. He forced himself to think past it: “True. Now that X.A.N.A. is...dead. Yes.”

But for some reason, his voice quavered as he spoke those words.

That evening Odd was alone in his and Ulrich’s room, lying on the bed, his back shot to pieces, and all thanks to Jim. The PE teacher had forced him to continually move the gym weights around in their storage cupboard, changing his mind every thirty seconds about the best manner in which to order them.

Odd had continually visualised the dinner hour as a distant mirage, a joyous opportunity to speak with his friends, but shortly before arriving in the cafeteria he’d received an SMS message from Ulrich on his phone: *The trap is set tonight. We’ll be eating at the Hermitage. Later.*

In short, Odd was lonely, tired and depressed. If he’d only had a little bit of strength left, he would have escaped and

joined the others at the villa, or at least have gone to Yumi's house to say hello to Kiwi. But his labours had left him barely able to raise his fingers to change the TV's channel.

And now I have to ache the whole evening? he asked the world.

And then he noticed several DVD discs scattered over Ulrich's bed, half-hidden under the duvet covers. This could be interesting.

He managed to ignore the pain in his legs and picked up a handful of DVDs. On the discs Jeremy had scribbled with a marker: *Hermitage Surveillance 1, 2, 3...*

This was the footage captured by the mini-cameras on the first night at the villa: hardly an action film, but at least Odd might catch a glimpse of this mysterious boy. Or perhaps Ulrich and Jeremy had missed something, and he might just discover it. For a moment he imagined himself attired in James Bond's tuxedo, a red rose in the buttonhole of the jacket and a dazzling smile on his face. On the ground in front of him were his friends, saved at the last moment thanks to his fearless intervention. Eva stepped up and embraced him, seduced by his charm...

He inserted Disc 1 into the player and set it playing, then lay down on the bed. All that appeared were images of the Hermitage's garden. Quality entertainment indeed! He fast-forwarded through the video, and then inserted Disc 2. And then Disc 3. And then he fell asleep.

Perfume: the scent of fresh fruit, like a sugary veil. A hint of roses.

“My love...” Odd whispered in his sleep.

The sound of sweet, silvery and very feminine laughter responding made him quickly open his eyes.

Odd thought he must still be dreaming.

Crouching beside him, her face only a few centimetres from his own, was Eva. Dressed in a white blouse and a vivacious, multicoloured skirt, her hair tied back by a colourful little ring. The most beautiful girl to have ever lived. No, she was so much more: divine, angelic, so wonderful and perfect that Odd’s throat closed up and he began to sweat.

“I’m sorry if I’ve disturbed you” she said, her fabulous accent tingeing her words. “I knocked and no-one answered, but I could hear the television and guessed that someone had to be in the room.”

Eva had knocked at his door? Was she looking for him? Oh, but that was a dream come true!

“No, it’s totally fine!” Odd cried, jumping into a seated position. He rubbed his vision clear with his fingers. “Come, sit where you like.”

The girl began to explore the room. She opened the wardrobe and closed it again, inspected the writing desk, glanced at the books and CDs. Odd watched her, captivated. She was a confident one.

“You know, it’s so boring at my house” Eva said. “My parents are already asleep.”

“Oh, I think I understand you!” Odd approved.

The sleep, his confusion and having Eva Skinner materialise a few centimetres from him was really turning his head. And was it him or was she also peeking under Ulrich’s bed?

“Ehm, you do know that you shouldn’t be here, right?” Odd murmured timidly. “Girls are not allowed to enter the male dormitories after dinner...”

Eva gave a snort. “If they don’t catch me, I don’t see the problem.”

It was faultless logic. At least as far as Odd cared. And a nocturnal trap and ambush could be so very boring.

Jeremy had worked the entire afternoon preparing his trap, and now was exhausted. In truth, he had not slept during the previous night in order to keep a constant eye on the Hermitage through the cameras.

Aelita and Yumi had organised the pizza, and they had all eaten in the living room, with one eye on Jeremy’s laptop and the other watching a film playing on the TV.

“Jeremy, you are sure that this boy will return tonight?” Ulrich asked.

“It’s very likely” his friend nodded. “Hiroki saw him leaving the Hermitage two nights ago. And he returned yesterday. I don’t know what he had in mind, but he certainly never accomplished it, since he just looked around and then escaped down the road. So this evening he’ll come back.”

They all stopped chewing. Aelita whispered: "I don't feel good about this."

Jeremy strove to sound cheerful. "Don't worry, there's nothing you need to do! There are three networked robots in the grounds around the Hermitage. I've installed motion-detection lasers in them and we can also control the traps from here, if we spot the boy on the cameras. He can't escape."

"What if he comes from behind?" Ulrich suggested.

"And climb the wall and avoid the traps? No, too complex. Yesterday he came through the front gate, so he'll do the same thing again. And in any case, the rear of the house is covered by the cameras as well. So as I said, there's no way he can escape. Which only leaves one thing that you have to do."

The others starred interrogatively at him.

"Pass me another slice of pizza. I'm starving."

Odd did not know what to think. Eva was not only the most beautiful girl on which he had ever set eyes, but she was also nice and intelligent. They had been speaking together for how long now, an hour? Without a moment's interruption or embarrassment.

Eva had asked him if he was interested in photography and he had nodded: he adored the photos of singers in music magazines, but it seemed to him that she had not understood. Instead she was talking about photography at the ex-

pert level: she had shown him some photos of America that had taken his breath away. And she had stacks of information on the use of objective lenses and editing software. All the while she had sat next to him, her wonderful legs crossed over each other. And at times, while speaking, her hand had brushed against his.

“You can’t stop and sleep here?” he boldly asked when Eva made to rise.

He had gone mad: if the principal caught them, it would guarantee his expulsion.

The girl smiled predatorily. “That wouldn’t be very profitable to either of us, Odd. But I would like that very much. But maybe one evening you could come and sleep over with me. My parents are often away for work. Do you know my address? I can leave you my telephone number as well.”

Odd was so stunned that he was barely able to nod his head.

Eva laughed again and produced a felt-tip pen out of her pocket. Taking one of his hands she wrote out the details on the skin of his palm, with all the lightness of a butterfly. “There you go. My address and number. Thank you for the evening Odd. I’ve had a really good time.”

Odd’s cheeks felt like they had caught fire. “Me...too. And I’ll never wash this hand again, I swear it.”

Eva giggled. Then, unexpectedly, while Odd was looking at her with adoring eyes, she stepped forward and kissed him. Right on the mouth. Several switches in his mind im-

mediately short-circuited. By the time he himself realised what had happened, Eva had already shut the door behind her.

“What a girl...” he mumbled, his expression blank.

In the meantime, his television set had never stopped playing back the footage of the Hermitage that Jeremy and Ulrich had recorded the night before. And right then Odd noticed that there was something very, very strange occurring onscreen. Something that no-one else had yet to notice.

7

THE INTERROGATION



The monitor of Jeremy's laptop suddenly began to flash.

ALARM! INTRUDER ALERT!

"Shush guys!" Jeremy hissed, while his fingers began to dance over the keyboard. "This might be it!"

Aelita extinguished the TV and Ulrich kicked away the now empty pizza boxes. The children pressed around the computer, which now displayed the image of a lanky figure wrapped in a long grey greatcoat, of those most often seen worn by spies and criminals in film-noir.

"Ha-ha!" Jeremy exclaimed in triumph. "He came in through the front gate, as I predicted."

"But there are no dogs with him. And it was definitely dogs that attacked Kiwi" Yumi reminded him, perplexed.

Jeremy shrugged. "He could have left them behind. They were not with him yesterday evening after all. In any case, we'll soon be able to question him in person."

He increased the micro-camera's zoom and the intruder's face filled the monitor: the boy with the copper-coloured hair. His half-closed eyes were underscored with two dark bags. In the gloom of the garden, he looked like a very ill person.

Seeing that face, Aelita again began to feel faint: she knew this boy, even if she could not remember where from or who he was.

"What next Jeremy?" asked Ulrich, interrupting her deliberations.

"We get ready. Once he's in position I'll spring the trap."

Ulrich sprinted into the kitchen, where they had left a big box containing materials for the coming interrogation. He lifted it with no effort and carried it into the living room, and then began to distribute its contents between his friends.

"Come on!" Jeremy grunted. "Why is he just standing there? Why isn't he approaching the porch or the garage?"

"I could go out there" Ulrich proposed. "And lure him towards the trap."

"That's too dangerous!" Yumi cut him off. "For all we know he might be armed."

Jeremy calmed them down. "It's all right, he's moving again."

One step forward. Then another. The boy on the monitor seemed undecided. He advanced towards the porch as if to

sound the bell, then he turned back and went to his left, towards the garage, walking hesitantly on the frozen snow.

Jeremy switched to the feed from another camera, mounted over the trap. Once the boy passed underneath...snap! He had deliberately prepared things so that he could relocate the trap based on the information from the cameras.

Just a few more steps...

On the monitor a wire-frame grid overlaid the image of the boy. A range-finder. The intruder's open eyes shone in the dark.

Everyone held their breath. Jeremy's finger moved onto the computer's EXECUTE key. Time seemed to slow down, even the leaves on the trees ceasing their movement as the boy onscreen walked cautiously towards the garage wall. Jeremy bit his lower lip and stabbed the key with his finger.

The trap was sprung.

In his room, Odd paused the image on screen and scrolled back several frames. Yes, there was something there. Jeremy and Ulrich had been chatting the whole night, perhaps their attention had drifted and they had never noticed.

He grabbed his phone and tried to call Jeremy. User unavailable. He tried Ulrich's number. The same result. A cold trickle of anguished fear squeezed through his T-shirt collar and slid down the length of his back.

He jumped to his feet and from under the bed dragged a big cardboard box that contained a laptop computer. It had been a gift from his parents and Jeremy had over several hours installed every program and application in the known universe onto it, but Odd had only used it once or twice to listen to some MP3 files. He was not a great fan of technology.

He waited impatiently as the gizmo fired up (did it always take an eternity for this thing to boot itself?), then he inserted the DVD and opened a video editing suite.

What was it Eva had told him about image enhancement? Ah. Contrast, brightness. And curves. He bungled about a bit with the software once he found the function that she had been describing. It was a kind of graphic that represented a quarter of a circle: Odd found that he could drag the curve around with the mouse, deforming it and changing...well he did not quite know what. Sometimes the image became crisper after fading to darkness, the colours going mad. But it was the only function he had any clue on how to use.

He started working with feverish concentration, his eyes focused on a single frame from the DVD: and at an exact point, between the trees, where the pixels of the image had become jumbled and confused. As if something had been hidden.

“Crap!” he hissed in a low voice. He had exaggerated the curve until the image became an incomprehensible mess of hotchpotch colours. He undid the action and started again.

There. The image of a man, with broad shoulders, a thin waist and imposing musculature. At his feet was something indistinct and hard to make out.

Odd saved a copy of the image, then extracted several more frames from the DVD and repeated the procedure. In the next image the man had turned into profile and the silhouette of a big rucksack could be glimpsed on his back. And standing as high as the level of his waist were...

“What the heck is that?” Odd cried. “Ponies? Calves?”

Neither one nor the other, obviously. They were dogs. Two big dogs with an aggressive attitude, unleashed, and smelling the ground at the man’s feet.

Two thoughts flickered through Odd’s head in rapid succession. First: this man had two dogs and Kiwi had been attacked by two such dogs. So it followed that the boy Jeremy and the others were waiting to capture at the Hermitage was innocent and they were going after the wrong person. Secondly: the man with the dogs had managed to mask himself from the video feed before it had been burnt to disc. That meant he had equipment sophisticated enough to tamper with Jeremy’s surveillance system. Then he was a very dangerous man indeed. And, worst of all, his friends had no idea he even existed.

Without even bothering to switch the computer off, Odd jumped to his feet, seized his jacket and phone and sprinted out of the room.

The entire world, and not just the garden, seemed to have drowned in snow.

Professor Hopper might have bothered to shovel the snow away, Richard Dupuis protested to himself. He leant against a tree and stood on one foot, recovering a sodden woollen sock that had slipped into the bottom of his boot and which was causing him grief.

Recomposed, the young man checked around himself, worried. He had come back. For the second time in two days he had secretly entered the garden of the Hermitage. This was the stuff of madmen. When all he had to do was ring the doorbell, adopt as casual an attitude as possible under the circumstances, and say: *Hello Professor. It's me, Richard Dupuis.*

He imagined his old teacher, that serious face under the dark beard, the bright-lensed glasses that hid the eyes from view.

Don't you remember me? I came because...

No, that did not compute. He could not face the professor so directly. And was Hopper even still living here? Richard could remember the newspaper headlines from so many years ago: *Mysterious disappearance of Kadic educator and only child.*

But no, he had to assume they had returned. Why else would...

Concentrating on his memories, Richard approached the garage. It was his intention to circle the house from the out-

side and judge if there were any lights on. And then, if he found anything, he would have summoned his courage to ring the doorbell.

Suddenly he heard a blast, a concentrated jet of air that disturbed the hairs on his head. And then there was a click or, more accurately, a retort.

What happened next was very confused. Something struck him in the back and knocked him off his feet into the snow. Frightened, he tried to recover his footing, but found himself becoming entangled in a kind of metal net.

He mustered the strength to get his feet under him and tried to straighten up, but the net writhed like a metal snake and dragged him back down. And then Richard was struck by an electrical discharge and lost consciousness.

When he reopened his eyes, for a moment he thought he had been drugged. Or that he had gone mad, or both of the two together.

He was still bound in the metal net, but instead of out in the garden he was now in a dark room with a cement floor. The only illumination came from a blade of light that emerged from under the bottom of a door: several large boxes stacked against a wall hinted at a house-moving that had never been completed.

Now that Richard's eyes were little-by-little adjusting to the darkness he could see four figures seated in a semicircle a few paces in front of him. They seemed extremely short,

perhaps they were dwarfs, and were shrouded by the darkness. Their faces were completely invisible. Richard shook his head: what was this, a dream? A nightmare? A surreal film in which nothing can be understood?

“What is your name?” demanded the figure seated furthest to the left. It had a very intimidating voice, deep and reverberating.

“R-Richard. Richard Dupuis” he stuttered.

“Why were you in the garden?” the voice continued.

Richard remained silent for a short while. He could lie, but what would he gain from it? Better to tell the truth. He had nothing to hide.

“I was looking for Professor Hopper” he answered.

“It’s a strange way to be looking for someone.”

“All I know is that the professor lived here before he disappeared over ten years ago.”

“You knew Hopper?” another voice enquired. It seemed to be that of a television actor whose name Richard could not recall.

The young man nodded, blinking to try and clear his vision and get a clearer view of the figures that surrounded him. “Yes. But years ago. Before he disappeared, I was a pupil of his at Kadic Academy. And I was in the same class as his daughter, Aelita.”

One of the dark figures started.

Richard's chin itched. This was an absurd situation, and a little frightening. But these strange people did not seem particularly threatening.

He continued: "I was hoping to see Aelita, if only because she might have been able to explain to me why...uff, well I can't show you why, bound up like this."

The strange person in front of him fiddled with something. The mesh of the net in which he was imprisoned loosened, allowing him to move.

Groping blindly, Richard searched inside his greatcoat and withdrew a palm-pilot computer with a tiny monitor little bigger than a playing card. It lit up instantaneously and on-screen appeared a scramble of letters and numbers, which gradually occupied every piece of free space. After a few seconds the display went blank and then the letters and numbers began to fill up again.

"This started ten days ago" Richard explained. "At first I thought it had picked up a virus, but then I realised that it was Professor Hopper's doing. Or, at least, I hope it is."

"Why Hopper?" the voice replied.

Richard jutted out his hand, holding the palm computer forward.

The series of letters and numbers seemed to be in an incomprehensible code...apart from the first six letters of each line, which spelt out in capitals: *AELITA*.

The corridor shone with white pools of neon light. Odd covered it constantly checking over his shoulder while trying again to dial the numbers of his friends: Ulrich, Yumi, Aelita and Jeremy. All of their phones were switched off. He had to reach them as soon as possible.

“And where do you think you’re going?” said Jim, rising up from behind a column.

“Sorry Jimbo, no time to stop!” he answered, trying to gain headway towards the door.

He suddenly realised that, even though his limbs were still in motion, he was no longer moving towards the door. Jim had picked him up from behind.

“No time for what? Must I remind you that you’re under curfew?”

Holding him up high like a puppet, Jim turned Odd around between his hands so as to look him in the face.

“Well?”

In the heat of the moment, Odd thought. He could not tell Jim that his friends were at the Hermitage: they were risking expulsion after having left the dormitories in the middle of the night. But in any case, he had to do something.

“Ok, but only if you put me down.”

As soon as his feet touched the ground, Odd took off again. While running he seized his phone and punched in the numbers that had been inscribed with rounded handwriting on his hand: Eva Skinner’s.

“Hello, Eva, it’s Odd. Yeah, sorry, but I need a favour. Do you know the Hermitage? It’s behind Kadic, an old house on Rue de...hold on.”

Odd turned. Jim was right on his tail. He hurled himself down the stairs towards the girls’ accommodations.

“Anyway, I’ve got no time to explain everything. Just sound the bell, three short trills and one long one. Three short, one long. You have to tell them that the red-headed boy is not the person we’re looking for. There’s another man. Thin but muscular, with two dogs. If they check the video footage again they’ll find him.”

Eva quickly repeated the instructions back to him through the phone’s speaker. Despite the late hour, she did not sound sleepy in the slightest.

“Perfect” Odd confirmed. “Like I said, this is really important. Thank you.”

Then he veered to the left and slid into the first door that presented itself to him. It was Sissi Delmas’s bedroom.

The girl’s howls when first Odd and then Jim appeared at the foot of her bed woke up all of Kadic.

They had left Richard in the garage and relocated to the kitchen to discuss what was to be done. A quick search on Jeremy’s computer had confirmed for themselves that yes, there had been a Kadic student named Richard Dupuis in the same class as Aelita Hopper.

“You don’t remember him yet, honestly?”

“No, even though yes, his face was familiar. But anyway...we have to let him go, right? He’s not done anything remotely evil.”

Jeremy did not seem wholly convinced.

“I felt that I knew him from somewhere” she continued. “And that’s why: he was my classmate. And now he’s ten years older than me.”

“Yeah, it’s strange alright” Ulrich admitted. “The fact that you never aged in Lyoko has made a beautiful mess of things.”

Jeremy took from the table one of the vocal manipulators he had built himself: it resembled a little ball of dark plastic tied to a ribbon. He arranged it around his throat, just under his chin, and then exclaimed, with the profound voice: “No. I’m not convinced. We’ll continue with the interrogation.”

“Ok” agreed Aelita, with her own vocal unit in hand.

“Hey” protested Ulrich. “I don’t want to have to use that gizmo again.”

“Oh stop your whining” Yumi said quietly.

He held out his apparatus to her with a hopeful smile.

Jeremy lay down at Richard’s feet, still hidden in the darkness, and seized the palm-computer. Richard jerked in fear, but the younger boy ignored it.

On the small monitor the tens of lines of code were still scrolling, each preceded by the word *AELITA*.

Jeremy attentively studied the coding, and it did not take him long to recognise it. All of it was written in Hoppix, the programming language devised by Hopper, the 'grammar' that allowed Lyoko to exist and take form.

"Ok" he at last concluded. "I don't know what this stuff means, but I'm sure that it was written by Professor Hopper."

And at that moment the sound of the doorbell echoed within the garage's rough walls. *Drin, Drin, Drin, Drrriiiin.*

"Three short, one long. It's the signal" Yumi whispered.

"AELIIIIITTTAAAA!" a female voice cried from outside the garage door. "It's me Eva, Eva Skinner! Odd sent me and he says it's important. Can you hear me? Are you in there?"

Richard wriggled beneath the net and tried to stretch his hands out into the darkness. "Aelita?! Is Aelita here?" He turned his head in Jeremy's direction. "You're not her, are you?"

The boy turned back towards his friends, unsure of what to do. Then behind him, Aelita strode to the garage door and flicked the light switch. The naked bulb hanging from the ceiling dazzled them for an instant.

When Richard saw the girl with the fiery red hair his face turned as white as a sheet. "You're, oh my... But you're..."

Then his eyes rolled back in his skull and he collapsed onto the floor.

"Did he just faint?" Ulrich asked, having thrown away his vocal manipulator.

◆ THE INTERROGATION ◆

“Oh I don’t know” Jeremy answered sarcastically. “You come looking for your classmate Aelita, expecting her to be twenty-three years old, like yourself, and find she’s still thirteen...”

Dossier containing all of agent Grigory Nictapolus' archives.
Highly confidential material.



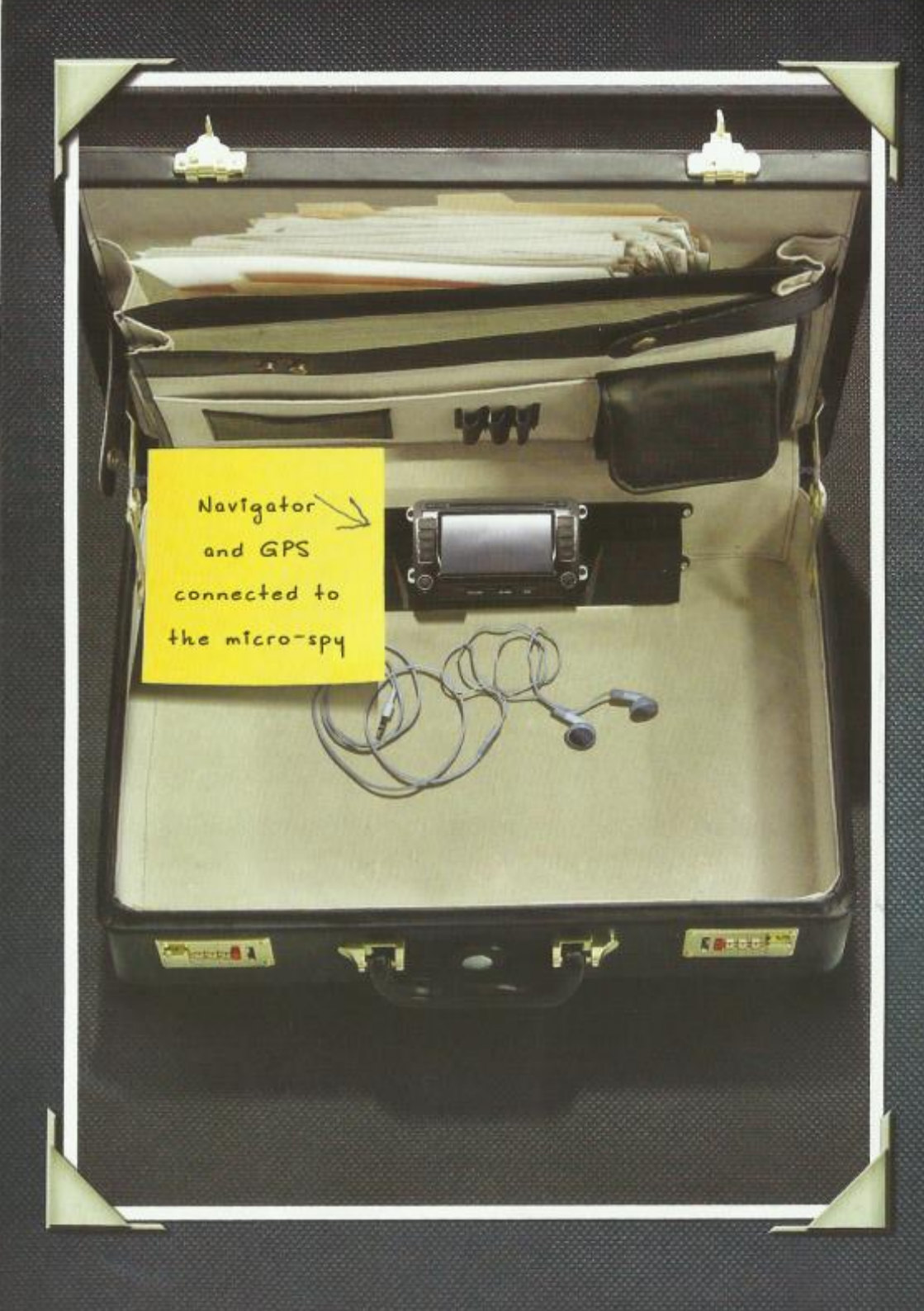
Golden insignia of the international Green Phoenix organisation.
It represents a phoenix in flight.
Model worn by Hannibal Mago.



Grigory Nictapolus' car.
Unrestrained engine that can reach 220km/h.



Grigory Nictapolus' suitcase, containing weapons, files and spying equipment.



Navigator
and GPS
connected to
the micro-spy



1



ROBERT DELLA ROBBIA'S
MEMORY FILE

Memory card for computer or digital camera. Contains the memories of Robert Della Robbia.

2



GRIGORY'S ROTTWEILERS

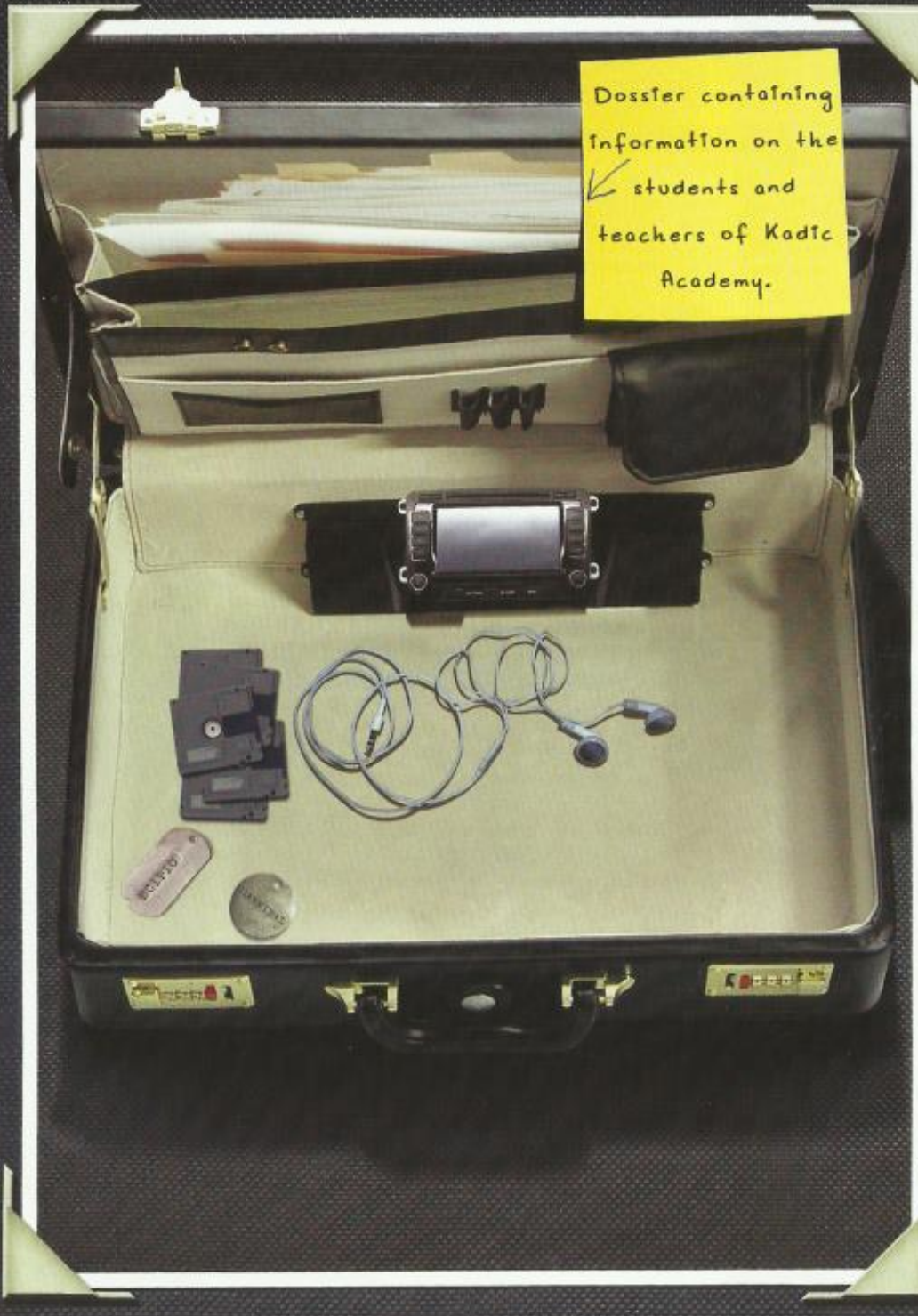


Grigory Nictapulus is never separated from his two hounds and only feeds them raw meat. Ready to attack, robust and ferocious, they have an infallible sense of smell thanks to years of spying alongside their master.

Dossier containing
information on the
students and
teachers of Kadtc
Academy.

10170

10170



3



COLLEGE KADIC

Le 1^{er} de Juin de la même année
avant le 15 décembre 1992 pour les étudiants de deuxième et d'admission
des universités québécoises d'après-guerre ou des universités étrangères.

PRÉNOM DU DEMANDEUR 1992
Richard DUPUIS

Information (pour les personnes morales)
Nom et prénom du mandataire (le / la / les) : _____
Adresse : N° _____ Rue _____
Commune _____
Code postal _____
Nature des activités : _____

Section : **D**

KADIC ACADEMY
ENROLMENT FORM

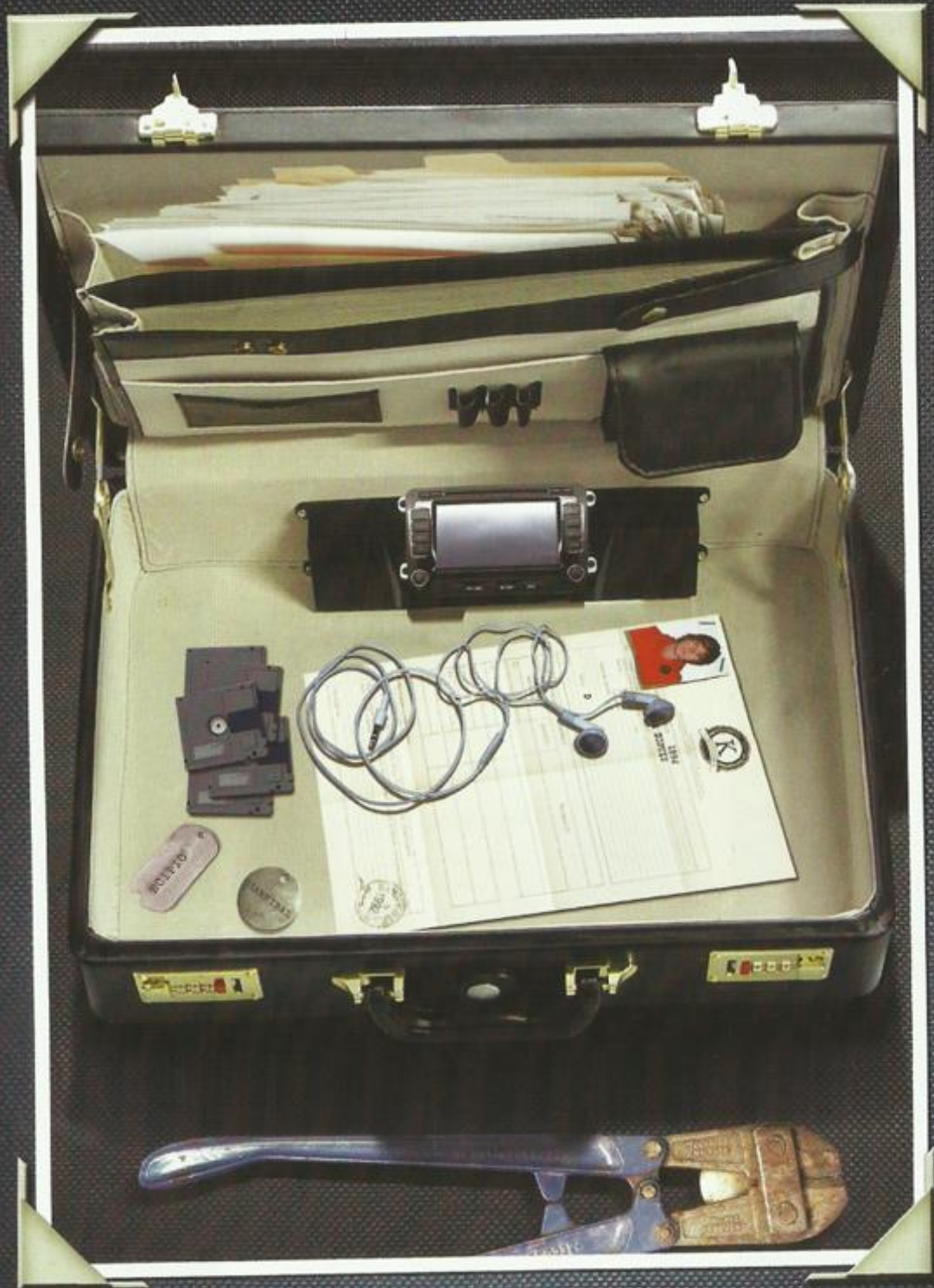
Kadic Academy enrolment form for the student Richard Dupuis. He seems to have a link to Aelita Hopper's past. Verify the date written on the document.

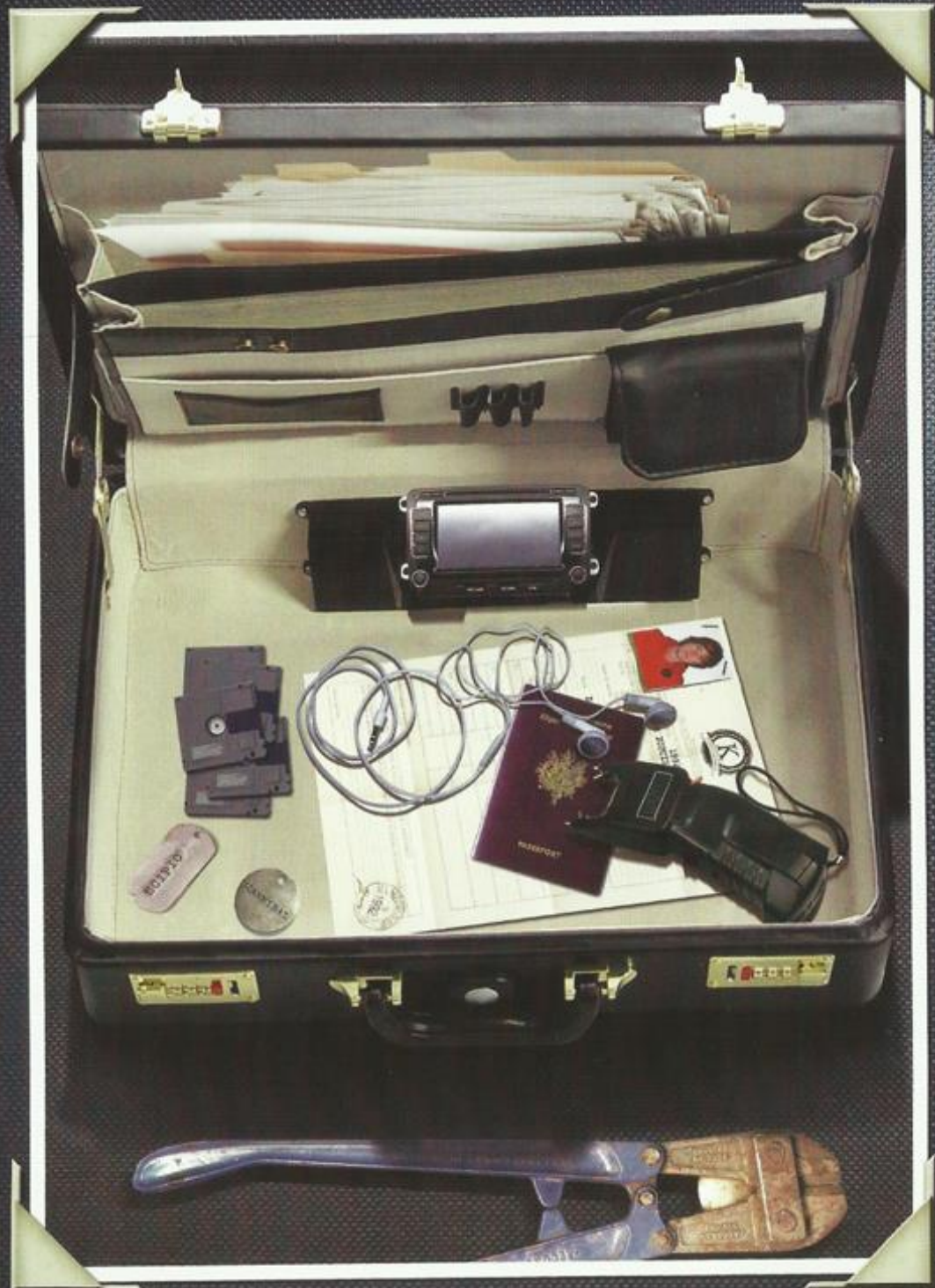
4



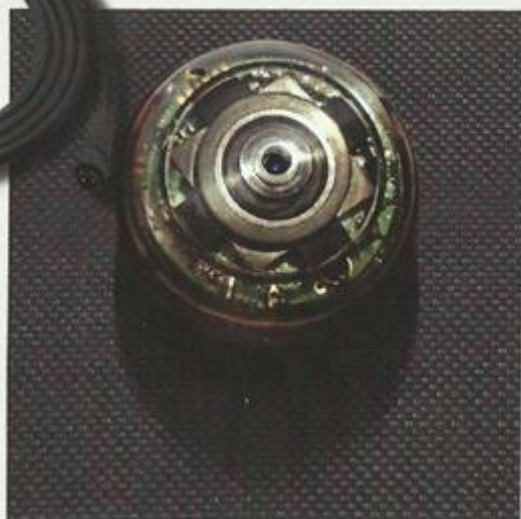
BOLT CUTTER

Similar models were found in the back of agent Nictapulus' pickup truck. Tool used for cutting cables or metallic hurdles, break chains or force locks.





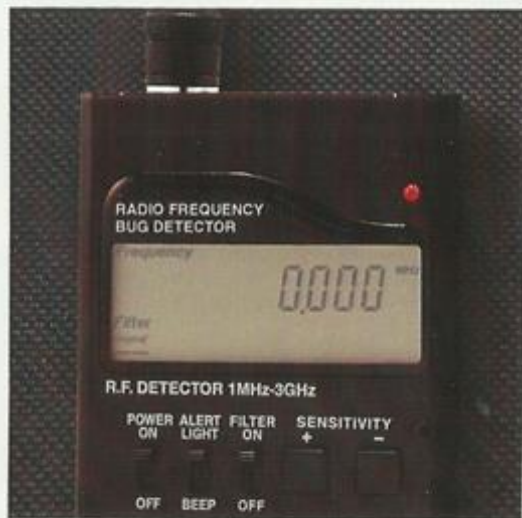
7



MICRO SPY
CAMERA

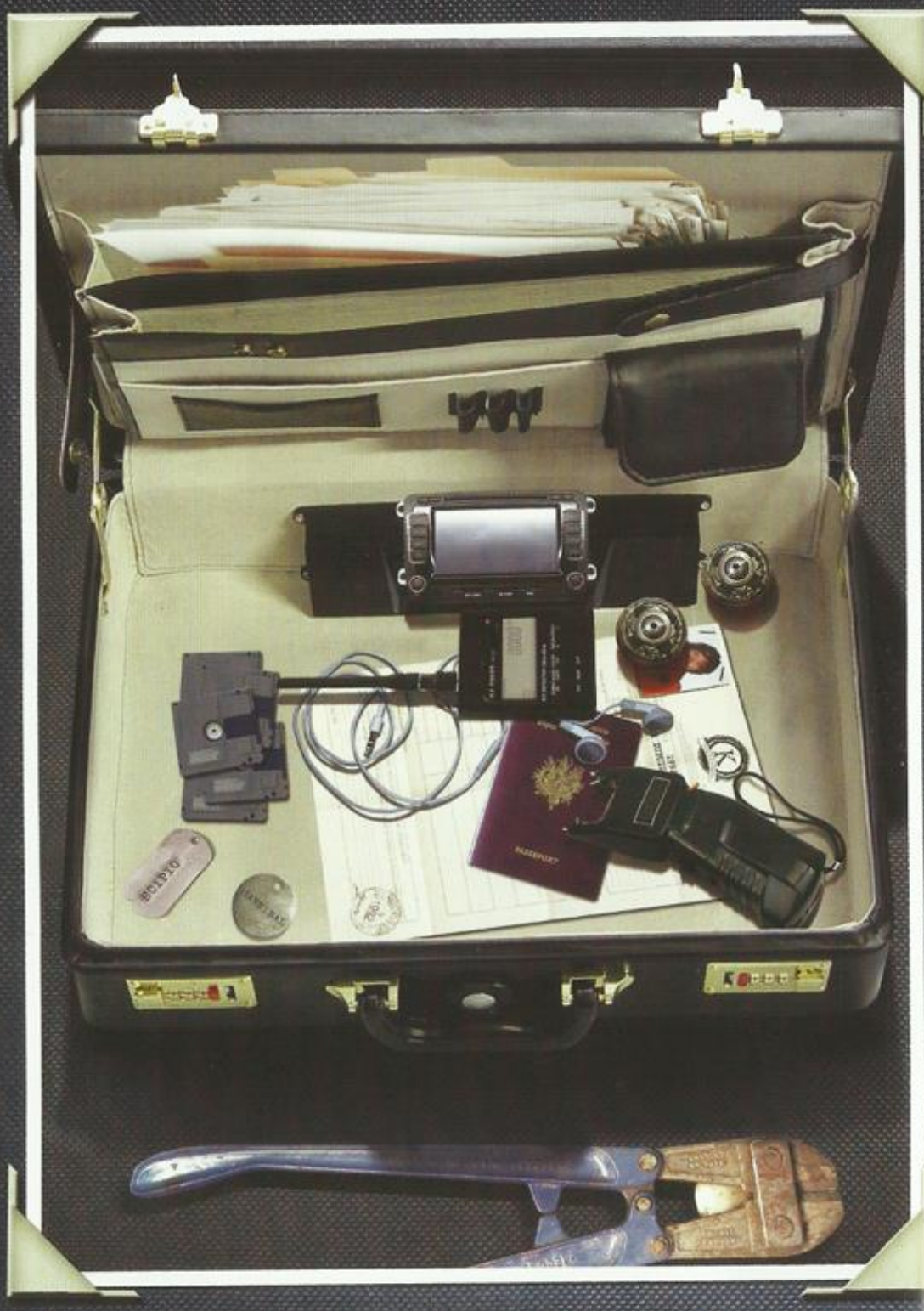
Large model only 8mm wide, with an omnidirectional motor allowing for complete rotation and a recording area covering 360 degrees. Used by agent Nictapulus for wire-tapping Kadac Academy and the Hermitage.

8



RADIO FREQUENCY
INTERCEPTOR

Can identify and record all radio frequencies, including those used by the police. If it's linked up to a microphone, the interceptor can eliminate all background noise, obtaining perfect audio recordings.



9



PORTABLE DVRS

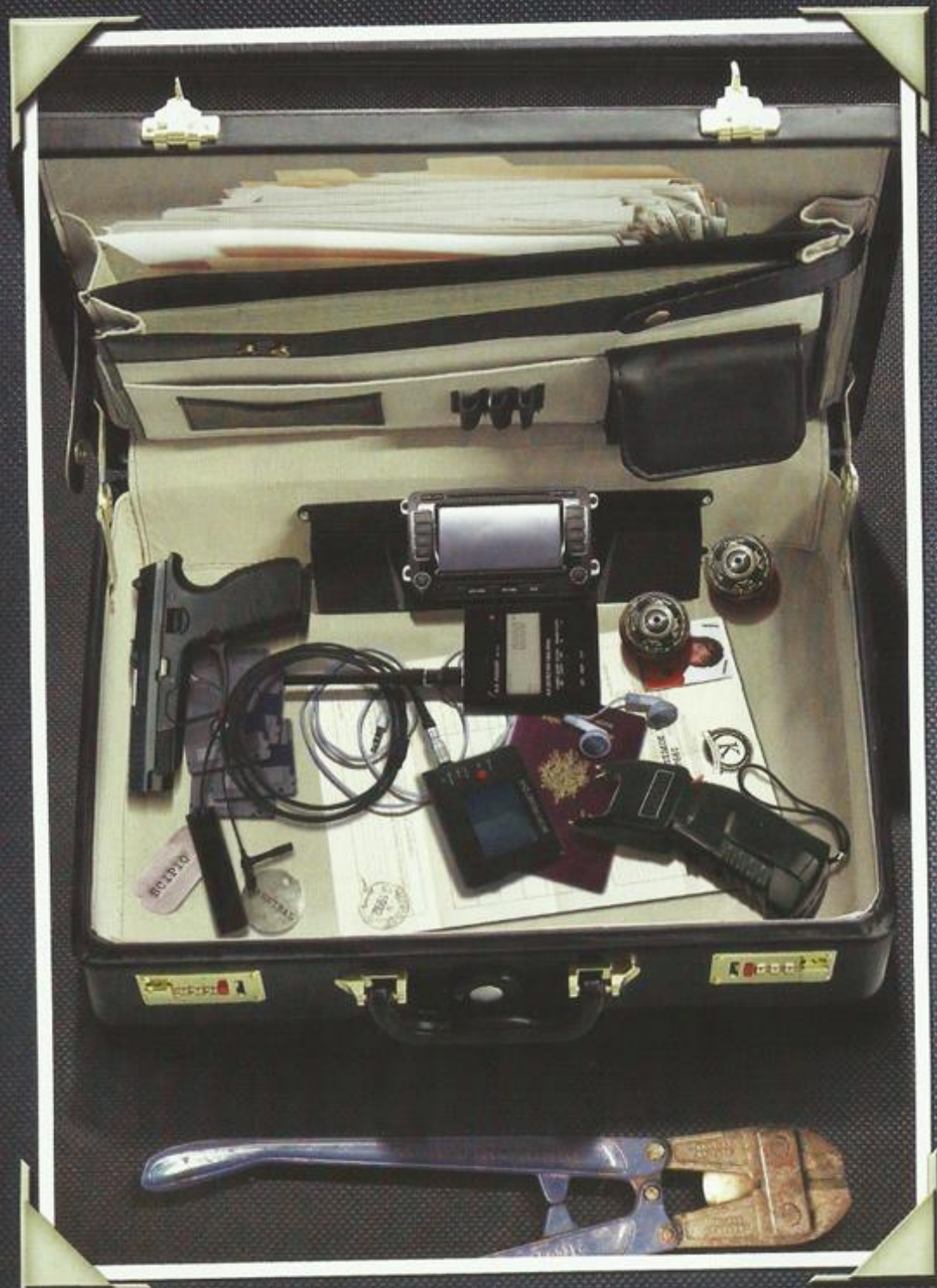
Digital Video Recorder. Used to control video spy cameras from a distance, recording images if necessary.

10



SEMI-AUTOMATIC
PISTOL

7-round model. Light, handy and most importantly, can be hidden beneath clothing.



11



XM8 ASSAULT
RIFLE

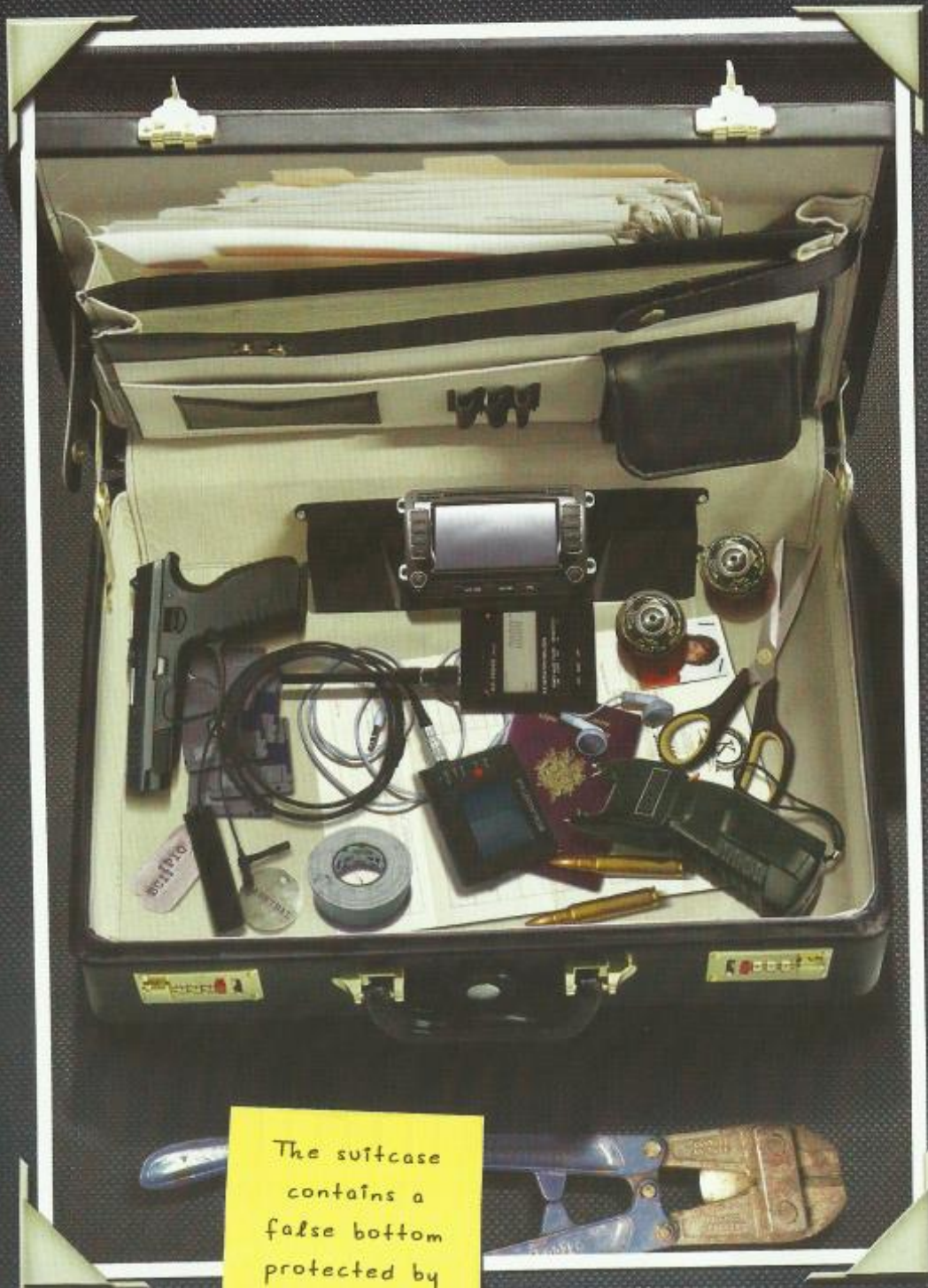
Unique prototype created by the United States Army and never put into production. We don't know how the Green Phoenix managed to procure it. Model fitted with a very high-precision infra-red scope.

12



MISCELLANEOUS
EQUIPMENT

Adhesive tape, scissors, screwdrivers, wrenches and bolts, probably used by Grigory Nictapulus to tamper with computers, install microphones or equip a spy base with sophisticated equipment



The suitcase
contains a
false bottom
protected by
an invisible seam.

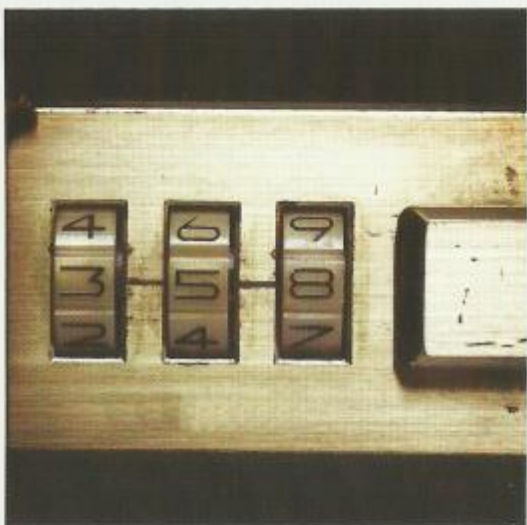
13



GRIGORY NICTAPOLUS

The only photo of agent Grigory Nictapulus, taken by a Japanese tourist at San Francisco airport. We don't know how Grigory got hold of it.

14

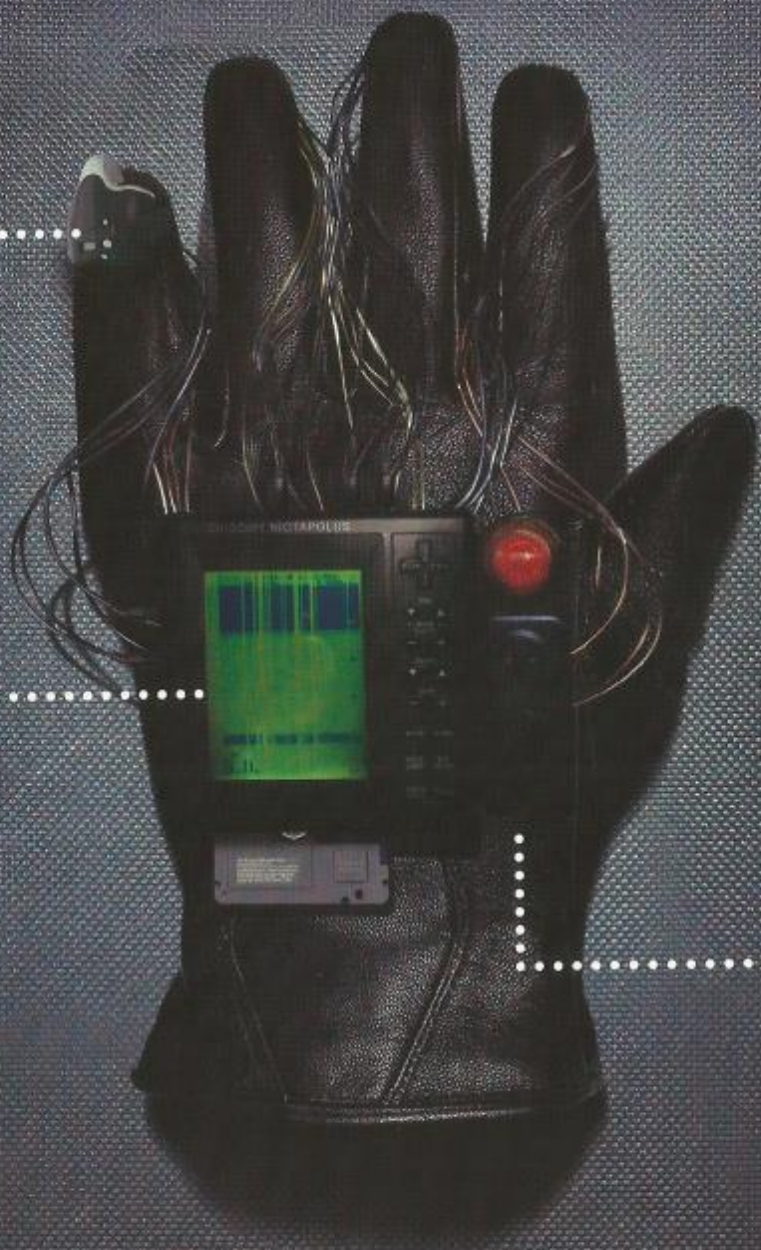


SECRET COMBINATION:
3-5-8

The lock on Grigory's suitcase, if it's not opened correctly, it spreads a strong acid through the inside of the bag that will then destroy any document, material and equipment.

MEMORY CAPTURE GLOVES

They allow the wearer to suck memories from a person and record them on a digital memory card or transfer them to a computer. The glove fingers have electrodes relayed to an LCD monitor with a potentiometer.



The potentiometer allows the sampling of memories from people who have been brainwashed.

Thanks to its tactile screen, the potentiometer can select memories to record or suppress.

8

THE MAN AT THE DOOR



“How did you know that we were here?”

Jeremy’s voice was cold and threatening, but Eva seemed nonplussed. In fact she smiled. “I already told you. Odd called me. He said that the red-headed boy, which I guess means him” she indicated towards Richard “is not the one you’re looking for. There was someone else, who had been masked from the video.”

“What video?” he replied in a tone of enquiry.

“The surveillance videos of the Hermitage” Eva replied with a grin. “If you’ll let me see them, I can show you the exact frame in just a few seconds.”

Jeremy straightened up: informatics was his field of expertise and he would not admit that he needed any help. He

returned moments later with the already-booted laptop and set to work. After half an hour's work he had located the incriminating frame and produced a clear, enlarged image. "A man, two dogs. This is insane."

"And you never noticed him before now" Ulrich exclaimed.

Jeremy lowered his gaze, resentful. "Only because the feed had been tampered with."

"You mean that someone modified them to hide this second person carrying a rucksack?"

"They must have had something that enabled them to digitally remove him in real-time. Incredibly advanced technology."

They all stood in silence for a moment, perplexed. Now they had at least two mysterious individuals to deal with. Richard, who in the meantime had regained consciousness, was certainly harmless: from his corner he had done nothing except stare, eyes wide open, at Aelita. The man with the two dogs however, was almost certainly dangerous.

Eva smiled again, and Yumi observed her with a frown: this girl seemed to be able to do nothing except smile, and always in the exact same way.

"Are you telling me that this is what you guys get up to at night?" Eva enquired. "All these equipment, computers, booby-traps...where did you get all this stuff?"

Ulrich moved to speak, but Jeremy stopped him with a jab of the elbow and answered in his place: “They were...purchased...by me, from a security system store.”

“And why?” the girl pressed on.

It was clear that they could not tell her about Lyoko and the supercomputer. But before they come up with a cover story, Richard pre-empted them: “I came here because I went to school with Aelita. More than ten years ago now. But then codes began appearing on my palm-computer, and they kept repeating the word Aelita, and I remembered my old classmate, who should have been twenty-three years old, but instead was thirteen, and then...”

They all burst out laughing. Richard’s explanation was so disjointed as to sound fantastic. Eva laughed as well, commenting sardonically that the others clearly had some secret they were withholding.

“It would be dangerous for us to tell you anything more” Jeremy explained. “The situation is complicated enough as it is.”

“But you haven’t told us anything to begin with!” Richard retorted. “Aelita is...she’s...”

“I’m ill...” she replied, hurriedly inventing a story. “I have a rare condition that stunts my growth.”

“And now she attends school with us, and nobody remembers her from before” Yumi added. “Which is why it’s a secret, you understand.”

Richard however did not understand and continued to shake his head. He went on to declare that he would not be leaving the city until he had a proper explanation of the situation.

“Another time” Jeremy cut him short. “It’s really late and we have to return quickly to Kadic if we don’t want to be discovered.”

“Alright. I’m staying at the Hotel de la Gare, next to the train station. I’ll leave you my phone number for now. But, if I don’t hear from you, I will come looking for you” he concluded darkly.

The children nodded.

Eva and Yumi left the house by the front driveway, in order to head back to their respective homes. The other children instead went around to the villa’s rear face, crossing directly in the grounds of Kadic Academy. Only a short walk now lay between them and the school buildings.

Total silence reigned, the moonlight reflecting on the snow-covered pine trees. Puffs of the three children’s breath steamed in the cold evening.

“Some evening, eh?” Ulrich murmured eventually.

“Yeah. Richard, my old classmate. It must have been a shock for him to see me like this.”

“And let’s not forget the mysterious man and the sudden arrival of Eva Skinner” Jeremy added. “I have the horrible suspicion that things are only going to get more and more complicated.”

The truth was that Hopper seemed to have left behind him a thick web of unsolved mysteries. For example everything relating to Lyoko and X.A.N.A. Who had been pursuing him when he took refuge in Lyoko with Aelita? And what was the ultimate fate of her mother?

The girl furtively slipped a hand under her sweater to grasp her father's love-trinket: *Waldo and Anthea*.

Jeremy began to reflect in a thoughtful tone: "In the video from the secret room, Hopper was talking about this secret Project Carthage. Now, it is probable that they were affiliated with the government, who don't usually turn bloodthirsty dogs loose."

"Which means?" asked Ulrich.

"It means, that this may be a government agency that has little respect for the rules...or that there's another party playing this game" he answered with a sigh.

"But who?" asked Aelita.

Jeremy checked around them, and then whispered: "Someone who has money, technology, and is ready to do anything necessary. We've got to keep on our guard."

Ulrich yawned. "What are you proposing, Jeremy?"

The juvenile genius wanted to wait and continue studying the video footage of the Hermitage, in hopes of discovering something else. But they were all beginning to feel a little worried.

Ulrich strove to smile. "Well, we can relax a bit for now. We're back at the school, there's the door to the dormitories, and we're going to have to split up for now to avoid Jim."

"Just one thing" Jeremy added. "Aelita, please. No nightmares tonight."

"I'll try."

She was on Lyoko. The landscape extending around her was flat, an expanse of sand broken here and there by oblong rocks that cast no shadows. The sky was a uniform dark blue from horizon to horizon. Aelita had a sense of vertigo, as if her eyes were unable to correctly process what she was seeing. This was how it felt when Jeremy brought her into Lyoko to terminate one of X.A.N.A.'s attacks.

But X.A.N.A. is dead. Daddy sacrificed himself to kill it. And the supercomputer has been shut down. This is just another dream, Aelita.

She had assumed the appearance of an elf, with finely pointed ears and vivid fuchsia hair, wearing a light dress that ended in a pink miniskirt, and underneath, leggings and soft boots. She didn't need a mirror to know that on her face two stripes of red makeup had appeared; starting underneath her eyes they cut diagonally across her cheeks to end at the corners of her mouth.

It's only a dream...

The sudden barking of dogs made her start with shock. They were nearby, and coming nearer with every second. She

began to run, making her escape over the sandy surface. From all the time she had spent on Lyoko, she knew things were not as they seemed, and what looked to be soft sand was in fact a hard and compacted layer into which it was impossible to sink. The growling dogs were gaining on her.

With her heart in her throat Aelita kept on running, only now the hiss and zap of laser rays had joined the ferocious barking. This was meant to be their sanctuary, but now there was no shelter to be had.

“This way.”

The sphere appeared suddenly, a ball of light little bigger than her head, hanging in the air. Inside currents of liquid light swirled, white, azure and ruby red. And that voice...she could never have possibly confused it with any other: it was her father.

“My dear, quickly, follow me. We don’t have much time.”

The sphere took off and Aelita followed it, while her invisible pursuers came near and nearer (she had never seen them, never turned back to look at them, but it didn’t matter: she knew they were there).

The sphere dropped to skim along the ground, which suddenly opened into a chasm.

“Aelita, jump in. We’re almost there.”

Leaping through, Aelita transitioned from the desert to a vast glacial plain. The difference was so staggering as to take the breath away. Now in place of the fake sand there was just smooth whiteness, ice that held no reflections, under a dark

and naked sky. No reference points, nothingness on nothingness all the way to the horizon.

“We have to find somewhere to hide!” Aelita cried.

“Don’t be afraid, they cannot find us here. Not for a little while, at least. Aelita, there is something important I must tell you. The secret room, where you found the video I left for you...”

Aelita stopped listening. A soft, subdued growling was coming from behind her: the dogs had found them here. She screamed.

She awoke with a start, drenched in sweat, then looked around and shrieked again. She was no longer in her room in the dormitories, but in the sewers. She lay in a flow of black water from which an unbearable stench arose, and her whole nightgown was soaked with sewage.

“Dis-gusting!” she exclaimed, rising to her feet.

What could have happened? She had said goodnight to Jeremy and Ulrich and went to sleep in her bed, just like normal. She had to have risen while dreaming, and left the dormitories. Somnambulism; she had been sleepwalking.

Aelita remained immobile for some time, the soiled nightgown clinging to her while she stared into the deep, heavy darkness of the sewers. She knew this place. It was the secret passage that led from Kadic Academy to the grounds of the Hermitage, her father’s villa.

Marguerite entered into the study and her husband, Robert Della Robbia, lifted his gaze from the display of his laptop computer. “Something wrong, sweetie?”

His wife’s eyes were tired and her delicate mouth was drawn into a wan smile he knew only too well.

“Something’s troubling you?”

She approached and distractedly brushed away some crumbs that had fallen into the weave of his sweater. In the evenings, when he had to work, Robert loved to munch his way through cookies. “It’s about what happened yesterday morning...”

“Are you still fretting over the spilt shopping? Sweetie, you most likely saw a cat jump through the window!”

“The window was shut! I saw a shadow escaping!” she protested.

“Well perhaps the cat came in through the door with you, moved the cushions and knocked over the shopping, then as you saw it escape, its shadow seemed bigger than it really was. And perhaps the window was not really closed but slightly ajar.”

Marguerite shook her head. “When have there ever been cats in this neighbourhood. Mister Wankowiz’s dog frightens them off, you know it does. I’m telling you that something was wrong. I’m sure of it.”

Before he could argue the case she suddenly changed the subject: “Have you phoned Odd today?”

“No. I’ve been very busy today, with that deadline, you know. And Odd’s not the type for calls, he only calls us if he needs something.”

“I’ve tried to reach him twice, but he never answers.”

“He’s probably been out skateboarding, maybe wearing his headphones over his ears. Or he’s courting some beautiful girls. You know how it is, he is your son after all.”

This time Marguerite’s smile was warm. “Hey Mister Della Robbia, Odd is your son too!”

“He he! Oh I know it, sweetie, don’t I know it. Now you go get some sleep, I’ll join you once I’m done here. Night-night.”

Now alone, Robert’s concentration returned to the computer, a boring sales report full of calculations that needed to be verified before tomorrow. It would take hours to finish.

After a few minutes, the front doorbell rang. Robert Della Robbia sighed in annoyance: it seemed he wasn’t going to get any work done this evening.

From the bedroom, adjacent to the study, he could already hear Marguerite’s light snoring: the fright of the previous day must have really left her exhausted. The doorbell rang again.

“I’m coming, I’m coming” he muttered. Who could it be at this hour?

In his slippers, he went down the darkened staircase, and reached the front door.

“Yes?” he asked.

From the other side of the door a male voice answered him: “I apologise for disturbing you at this hour, but my truck

has broken down and my phone is dead. I need to make a telephone call.”

Robert opened the door. Standing before him was a tall man, with a thin face and hollowed-out cheeks, shortly cut hair and very penetrating eyes. He was wearing a Macintosh and had the broad shoulders of a leanly-built man who could nevertheless call on quite a reserve of strength.

“What happened to her, pal?” Mister Della Robbia asked kindly.

The man sighed, but the expression of relief did not reach his face. “She just suddenly stopped, in a massive cloud of smoke. I’d like to call someone to come recover her. Heaven knows, I’m not a great mechanic.”

Robert looked him in the eye, rather distrustfully. “Really? I wouldn’t have expected that.”

“Pardon?”

“I don’t know, but from your face I’d believe you could build a car from scratch all on your own.”

The man answered with a forced smile: “Well, unfortunately, it’s not like that. My phone is dead, so I thought I could get help, but the bar on the corner is closed, and so is the gas station...”

“That’s normal” Robert confirmed, in a more cordial tone. “At night this is a pretty quiet neighbourhood.”

The stranger suddenly looked as if a thought had struck him. “Hey, what if you came and had a glance at my car with

me? If you know something I don't we might be able to fix it between us."

"Not a problem" Robert smiled. "I'm not an expert either, but they say two heads are better than one."

The stranger had parked right at the bottom of the Della Robbias' driveway: the vehicle was a pickup that looked more than a little lived-in, with muddy off-road tires.

Robert noticed movement in the passenger compartment and stopped.

The snout of a dog had appeared behind the window, bloodstained teeth pressed against the glass as the animal growled.

Dogs? But why hadn't Mister Wankowiz's barked? It could usually smell other animals up to a kilometre away.

Robert began to turn around to ask for an explanation, but something struck him in the back of the head, forcefully, and he passed out.

Grigory shouldered the motionless body of Mister Della Robbia and laid him out in the pickup's cargo-bed. Then he opened the door to calm Hannibal and Scipio down.

"Down, you two, be still...you had enough fun 'playing' with that Wankowiz dog."

The two beasts obeyed instantly, curling up on the seats so that their snouts rested between their legs.

He picked up a small case that was lying on the back seat and from it extracted a soft-cover album of memory cards

and a pair of gloves. They were of basic leather make, but entwined around the fingers were plastic wires of various colours, connected to electrodes positioned on the fingertips. On the back of the right hand were mounted a little multicolour display and a power switch.

The album however contained duplicates of all data he obtained using the Machine. It was so precious that Grigory never parted company with it. Nobody knew about the archive's existence, even Hannibal Mago, the Magician. The collection of memory cards was his personal insurance policy, his hope of a dignified pension.

Grigory picked a blank, virginal memory card and removed it from one of the album's transparent sleeves. He quickly inserted it into a port underneath the gloves' display.

At that exact moment, Hannibal and Scipio launched themselves out of the car and threw themselves on him, barking and wagging their stumpy tails: they had long ago learnt that, when Grigory put on the gloves, something important was about to happen. The album fell to the ground with a dull thud.

"Please be alright, please be alright!" Grigory hissed hoarsely.

Groping around, he hurried to recover the album and several memory cards that had scattered themselves in the fall, then he breathed deeply to regain his calm and self-control. Mishaps, set-backs, everyone had to deal with little mishaps at times in their lives. And residential neighbourhoods like

this could be dangerous places: just when it seemed that everyone was sleeping like angels, just when you let your guard down, all it would take would be for someone, perhaps some old coot on the verge of death anyway, to glance out of his window, see what was happening, and rouse the neighbours. They'd be on any intruder in seconds.

Grigory Nictapolus finally pulled on the gloves and activated them, flipping the switch by pressing it against his chin. He approached Robert's unconscious body and lightly laid his fingertips against the temples of the man's head.

The words *MEMORY TRANSFER INITIATED* flashed on the gloves' little display.

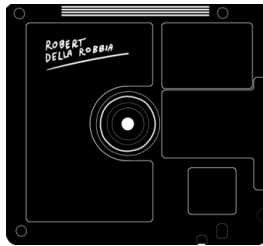
At that moment, in the spectral villa that Grigory had occupied in the city suburbs, not far from Kadic, his most sophisticated equipment whirred into life. On the computer displays images played showing a child running over a meadow, his fair hair cut short and a carefree expression on his face. The same boy was now in school, wearing a black smock with a blue bow and looking miserable.

Next there was a young man in a jacket and tie, his newlywed wife Marguerite beside him in a bridal dress: both of them looked very young and very much in love. Then Robert on his first day at work, his beard freshly trimmed. Robert waiting anxiously outside the delivery room in a hospital, inside of which his wife was about to give birth to their son, Odd.

The images began to speed up, while the computer continued to record everything.

9

A CODED MESSAGE



Odd was led into the principal's office under escort from Jim Morales. As soon as Mister Delmas raised his head from the documents scattered across his desk, the boy wriggled out of the gym teacher's grasp and burst out: "What happened yesterday evening wasn't my fault! I went to use the bathroom and ended up in your daughter's room by accident! I'm innocent I tell you!"

Principal Delmas nodded seriously. "I know that, Odd."

"What, how do you know?"

"I have not asked you to come here regarding any form of punishment."

Smiling, Odd sat down in one of the study's leather arm-chairs and crossed his legs. If his innocence wasn't in ques-

tion, they he was only too happy to chat with the principal. "Fire away then, how can I help you? Do you need advice, perhaps?"

Delmas and Jim stared at him in amazement.

"Yes, I know, I might not look it, but I'm actually a great listener...if something's troubling you then feel free to bring your problems to me."

The principal shook his head and the serious expression from before reasserted itself across his face. "No Odd. I'm afraid this is a more troubling situation. I've just received a telephone call from your mother."

The boy jumped to his feet, all joking forgotten. "Something's happened?"

"It appears that last night your family's home was burgled. In the process, the thieves attacked your father. I don't want to worry you, but at this time he has been hospitalised."

Odd staggered, mumbling half-shaped words, and Jim put a hand on his shoulder to steady him. The headmaster nodded. "Now, your father is uninjured, but somewhat confused. For his own safety they're holding him for further observation, but nothing more. If you wish, you can visit him."

"Of course I do!" the boy exclaimed.

"I imagined you would, and I've already arranged for a taxi. Jim will accompany you to the station and on the train. When you arrive, your mother will be there to collect you.

Odd felt as if someone had struck him upside the head. It was impossible that someone could have inflicted some evil

on his father, the fairest and most even-tempered man in the world. Impossible.

Jim seated himself aboard the train and awkwardly gestured for Odd to take the seat next to him. Not much accustomed with showing kindness to the students he seemed rather out of his depth.

“Now, ehm, don’t you worry,” he smiled. “Jimbo’s here with you.”

The boy gazed back at him, puzzled. “Jim, I really want to talk to my mum.”

Jim agreed, and Odd stepped out into the corridor. The train slowly pulled out of the city, gradually gathering momentum. It was half an hour to home. A long half an hour. Pulling out his phone he called his mother, who although agitated sounded strained and quiet. Eventually he insisted that she tell him what had happened; at times it could be so difficult to communicate with her.

“I had gone to sleep” Missus Della Robbia explained. “But I woke up when I heard noises. Someone rang the doorbell and your father went down to open it. I waited for a bit, but he never came back up. I was afraid! I rushed down and found the door wide open. There was a pickup parked in front of our house. When I came out of the house, a man threw your father out of the vehicle, and then fled. I then ran towards him...”

“How’s Dad doing?” Odd asked anxiously.

“He has a few scratches, but nothing serious. He was unconscious. The man must have given him a nasty whack to the head, because when he woke up, he didn’t remember anything...”

Marguerite paused, then continued, voice trembling: “Oh Odd, I knew he was going to do something! The other day, I felt like I was being watched at home, and then there was this story with the open window...the groceries on the ground...”

Her son was seriously beginning to lose his patience. What on Earth was she talking about?! Luckily, his father was ok. But who had attacked him?

“Mum!” he said, annoyed. “Try to remember! Describe this pickup to me!”

“I think it was black, and old. I was too upset. I can just confirm that there were two dogs inside it. They had their muzzles pressed against the window and were barking.”

“Dogs!” Odd cried. “Are you sure? Did you call the police?”

“Of course! They’re even going to do an overview of the house this afternoon.”

“Great! Anyway, I’m on my way there!” He reflected for a brief instant, then added: “Mum...I love you.”

Then he hung up.

During recess, Jeremy often preferred to stay in the classroom to revise his work than go talk with the others outside.

Once empty, the classroom was a very relaxing place. He could also think about all the events of the previous night: Richard, Eva. And then...

His phone rang. It was Odd. Jeremy stared at the screen showing his friend's photo for a moment. He hadn't been present at school that day!

"Hello?" he finally picked up.

Then, he remained silent, totally absorbed by the incredible story. Odd's father, victim of a kidnapping attempt? When his friend finished speaking, Jeremy's head boiled.

"Odd!" he began, nervous. "Listen carefully. You know that I don't believe in coincidences. The man with two dogs is the same person that was erased from the DVDs. Go to the hospital as quick as you can and question your parents as much as possible. See if they've found something, if they've found fingerprints... That could be important. We'll continue with the investigation on Richard here. And on Hopper, naturally..."

Even if Jeremy couldn't see Odd, he could very clearly hear his friend slap his forehead.

"Aah, I almost forgot!" he cried.

"Forgot what?" Jeremy asked.

"The other day, when I went to the principal's office, I saw that he had a file on Waldo Schaeffer on his desk. It's possible that Delmas knows something!"

Jeremy sighed, sceptical: "But I hacked the school computers and the information was..."

“It was a huge file, Jeremy! With the name Waldo Schaeffer on the cover. I’m not mistaken! You absolutely have to find some way to read it. And I’ll let you know if I find anything interesting. Ok, talk to you later!”

Jeremy hung up and rushed out of the classroom.

The hospital consisted of a set of square buildings of different heights, painted in a bright white. It was surrounded by a large park with very orderly lanes, on which the ambulances came and went like arrows. Odd got out of his mother’s car, which had come to pick him up from the station. Then, the two of them headed to the surgery block where his father was hospitalised.

While he walked, Odd never stopped observing his mother. Her brow was furrowed and her gaze fixed. She seemed very worried. He approached her and took her hand, murmuring: “You’re sure that Dad’s alright?”

“Yes, yes, I’m certain... He’s just a bit upset. But that’ll pass, I’m sure of it.”

Upon entering the hospital, they met the usual odour of disinfectant, mixed in with the light aroma of coffee from the vending machines. Marguerite stopped for a moment at the reception, then guided Odd to his father’s room. The room was small and stifling. The two other beds were occupied by small old people in pyjamas sleeping soundly.

The student poked his head through the door. His father had re-awoken and was staring at the ceiling. He had a black

eye and bandages around his head. Plus a nasty gash on his arm, rested on the white sheets. All his injuries resulted from his fall from the pickup.

Odd entered shyly and approached his bed, forcing a smile. "How are you?" he asked.

"How great, you're alright!" his father exclaimed in a high-pitched voice that his son didn't recognise.

"Of course I'm alright, Dad!" Odd straightened himself. "Nothing happened to me!"

Robert smiled and announced, "I'm very happy. Walter dismissed me, and... How are you?"

Odd leaned forward, eyes wide. "Walter? Who are you talking about, Dad?"

"Everything will be fine here, I'm sure. And then I want some biscuits. Walter...it's a shame, but there's a balance sheet to fill out, or so..."

Odd's father continued to stammer a series of nonsense phrases, then let his head drop onto his pillow, exhausted. Finally, he turned to his son and blurted, "I feel like I know you, young man. What's your name?"

"Odd, Dad. I'm Odd."

"A nice name" his father breathed. "In English, that means 'strange'. You know that? If I ever had a son, I would have liked to have called him that too. But you, with that hair, you are it a little, strange!"

The young boy nodded, kissed his father, then rejoined his mother, who was waiting for him in the hallway.

“He’s in bad shape!” he said gravely.

“No!” she assured him, nervously shaking. “I already told you, he’s just confused. The doctors say that it’s because of the trauma, but soon, he’ll be back to normal. Don’t worry...”

Odd remained silent. At that moment, the only thing that could really help his father was to discover the identity of the man that attacked him. He had to do as Jeremy suggested and interrogate his mother.

Odd smiled at his mother, then indicated to two empty chairs in the waiting room. They sat down, and Odd began his ‘investigation’.

“Mum, tell me what happened yesterday from A to Z. Did you see something? You didn’t find anything strange?”

Marguerite began to speak, but she didn’t really tell him any more than she had already over the telephone. A pickup, maybe black, with two dogs... Which had sped away as soon as she stepped outside.

“Oh, I almost forgot!” she added suddenly. “There’s also this!”

She fumbled around in her bag and pulled out a dirty grey plastic rectangle. It looked like a car had driven over it.

Odd took the object and turned it in his hands, observing from every angle.

“What is it?” he murmured. “It looks like a memory card for a camera.”

“I found it next to Dad when I ran towards him” his mother clarified. “Do you think we should give it to the police? Maybe the man who attacked him was the one who lost it...”

A memory card... Very strange... Odd slipped it into his pocket. It could contain some clues. He examined her quietly.

“The police? It’s not worth it, Mum” he lied. “This card is Dad’s. It must be one of his work documents, or something like that. You told me that he was working last night, right?”

His mother nodded her head.

Ulrich sighed. The menial tasks always fell to him...

Kadic’s cafeteria buzzed with teens talking and looking for a place to sit. Sissi was eating beside her 'bodyguards' Herve and Nicolas, but when she saw Ulrich approach, she smiled at him and pushed Herve out of his chair.

“What a surprise, Ulrich! Were you looking for me?”

“Uh, yeah!” he murmured.

“Well, sit and eat with me! Herve and Nicolas were just about to leave!”

“But we...”

“You WERE JUST ABOUT TO LEAVE!” Sissi insisted with an unanswerable tone.

The two boys were forced to obey: they took their trays and went elsewhere!

Ulrich sat next to the young girl who immediately wrapped an arm around his neck! And pressing her cheek against his, she whispered, “So, tell me everything!”

“I...see...actually, I needed...”

“A favour?” Sissi cut him off. “But of course... So, you need me?”

Ulrich rethought everything Jeremy had advised him that same morning, just after Odd’s phone call. According to them, it was easy: two or three small compliments, a little flirting, and poof, the deed was done! Yes, it was exactly that!

Ulrich had to get into principal Delmas’ office to get the dossier on Waldo Schaeffer, but he needed someone to distract the principal for the necessary amount of time. And Sissi was the ideal person... He just needed an excuse to convince her, and they found one! Several days earlier, Professor Hertz gave Ulrich a bad grade. So, he could tell Sissi that he decided to play a prank on the teacher to get revenge, but for it to succeed, he needs the key to her office... The key which, coincidentally, is kept with all the others in the principal’s ‘lair’... According to Jeremy, this story would definitely work!

As soon as Ulrich finished his explanation Sissi sneered, “I suspected you were hiding something, with your whole nice-guy attitude, but I don’t know if I can...”

“Come on, Sissi...help me out. After that, we can celebrate together!”

With every word, he grew more confident. He remembered more of Jeremy’s advice...

“Come on, we’d be the perfect partners in crime! Like Diabolik and Eva Kant. Like Lupin and Margot... Like Robin Hood and Princess Marian...”

Sissi jumped at the word 'princess' and grinned, “Wow! Princess?! Downright!”

“Yes, yes, whatever makes you happy!” Ulrich said. “So, do you really want to help me?”

“Meet me in my room in four hours!” the girl ordered. “That way, before you go, I can show you my new clothes!”

Ulrich made an insurmountable effort to mask his boredom... Pfft! Girls' clothing! But well, that was the price to pay to help Aelita find her mother...

He entered Sissi's room and found her smiling, in makeup, and dressed in a neon green tank top covered in sequins and a vibrant pink miniskirt. Ulrich asked himself, *How can she go out looking like that?!*

“Do you like it?” she asked maliciously. “I chose this skirt just for you!”

Ulrich doubted that was a compliment... Then, for half an hour, he watched a frightful fashion show as patiently as possible. Finally, he reminded his 'model' that it was getting late...

He accepted to take the arm of the young girl, who gloated. They then walked through the dormitory and exited into the park to return to the wing of the school where the princi-

pal's office was found. Luckily, at this hour, the corridors were almost deserted!

"You know what you have to do?" Ulrich whispered.

"Of course!" his accomplice sighed. "I take care of Daddy, and you go in and take the keys for Professor Hertz's office, then we get out."

"That's it. Great..."

They stopped in front of the heavy wooden door and Ulrich knocked timidly. No response. Sissi then opened the door and stuck her head in.

"Daddy's not there!" she whispered. "Come on, let's go in and take the keys, quick."

"No, wait" Ulrich said, stopping in his tracks. "What if he comes back? I'll go in alone, and you stay outside and keep watch. If your father arrives, try to distract him and keep him away from here so I have time to escape. Ok?"

The plan wasn't bad...

Ulrich entered Delmas' office and closed the door behind him. The room had been well-cleaned. On the left, by the wall, was the set of keys with which one could open all the doors in Kadac. And on the right, next to the two leather armchairs, there was a large metal filing cabinet.

"Well" Ulrich sighed. "Off to work..."

The cabinet, of course, was locked and there were no labels on the different keys. Smart! How does the principal find what he needs when he needs it?

For ten good minutes, he tried the keys one after the other on the drawers. And by chance, the last one was the right one! The cabinet contained absolutely all the files concerning the students and teachers at Kadic. Ulrich opened the drawer labelled *P-Z* and began to search. Well, there was his file too: *Ulrich Stern*. Unfortunately, he didn't have time to read it! However, on the first page, he saw a Post-it written by Professor Hertz, which said: *Intelligent student, but not very applied*. Ulrich shook his head and continued to search in the opposite direction: *Stern, Stainer, Skinner, Salper...* No *Schaeffer*. Maybe he put it under *W*, for *Waldo*, then? Not that either... Where had the principal really stored it...?

Sissi knocked on the door and whispered, entering: "Hurry up, I'm not comfortable out here... But...? What are you doing?"

"Nothing, I haven't found the right key!"

"Come on, hurry! Get a move on!"

Alone once again, Ulrich started to turn around in the room. The file was surely somewhere... The desk! There were three drawers, which were also locked by key. And they can't be seen until seated on the principal's chair... That's why he hadn't noticed them! He nervously tried the keys one after the other, but the drawers didn't open. The lock was too small for each one... Where had Delmas hidden the right key?

Sissi knocked on the door once again; she was really beginning to lose her patience. Desperate, Ulrich stooped down

to check if there was any key taped to the bottom of the desk. Nothing. And above, there was nothing but a penholder... But... Bingo! The key was hidden under the erasers!

The first drawer contained a yellow dossier, with *Waldo Schaeffer* written on it in marker. Ulrich's mission had finally succeeded!

He slipped the file into his pants, covered it up with his T-shirt, then put everything back in place before leaving the office.

"That's it!" he said to Sissi, relieved. "Thank you so much!"

But then, at that same moment, Principal Delmas appeared at the end of the corridor.

"Hey, you two! What are you doing there?"

Ulrich felt his heart stop.

"We came to find you, sir!" he responded in a wobbly voice. "Um...Sissi wanted to talk to you and I accompanied her. But I have to go now, it's very late and I haven't finished my homework...! Goodbye!"

Without waiting for an invitation, Ulrich ran like crazy into the corridor...

Jeremy and Yumi knocked on Aelita's bedroom door. But it was Odd who opened it.

"What are you doing there?" they asked, surprised. "And your father, how is he?"

Odd let them enter. Ulrich was also there, seated on the bed, near Aelita, hands crossed behind his head.

“He’s not too bad” Odd responded, shrugging. “But he’s completely lost. He didn’t even remember that I’m his son... Anyway, my mother spoke with the doctors who confirmed that it’s normal after such a violent hit. I insisted to come back here as soon as possible because I think that what happened to him is undoubtedly our fault...”

“Of course not!” Aelita reassured him. “It’s absolutely not your fault!”

“Maybe, but it’s up to us to resolve this!”

Suddenly, Jeremy noticed the large dossier on the desk. He then turned to Ulrich, “You succeeded? You found the file?”

“Yes, and I even got Sissi to help! But I wanted to wait for you to open it.”

Jeremy grabbed the sleeve religiously and sat on the floor, leaning against the bed. He removed the rubber band. On the inside of the file, there was a large and voluminous envelope, on which was written: *Principal Delmas, thank you for taking care of this for me.*

“Hertz’s handwriting!” Ulrich cried.

“But what part does she play in this story?” Yumi asked.

“Hey!” Jeremy intervened. “One thing at a time! Now, let’s open the envelope and see what’s inside!”

He opened it with a letter opener, then took out a pile of papers that he placed on the floor.

“But what does that mean?” Odd said, observing the scribbles. “We can’t understand any of it!”

“It must be a coded message!” Yumi announced.

Jeremy shook his head, turning the papers over. All contained incomprehensible characters. They looked like letters written completely at random. There were at least three hundred pages!

“It’s not a message!” he said. “But a real code: Hoppix. It’s the programming language that Aelita’s father invented to create Lyoko.”

With these words, everyone began to talk at the same time.

“You mean to say that Hertz knows about Lyoko?” someone said.

“How did she get her hands on this code?” said another.

“Is it the same as what Richard showed us on his palm-computer?”

“Hey, I don’t know!” Jeremy interrupted. “Yes, it’s like on Richard’s palm-computer... But I have no idea what this program can do.”

“But understanding it is super simple!” Odd announced, laughing. “You just have to go to the old factory, turn the supercomputer on and copy the thing! Then we’ll see what it does...”

“The supercomputer can’t be reactivated!” Jeremy replied.

“Need I remind you that, in his video, my father ordered us to shut it down?” Aelita recalled.

“We can’t go on like this!” Yumi cut in. “This story keeps getting more and more mysterious. The supercomputer really seems to be the only thing that can get us out of it.”

“Oh, but have you forgotten X.A.N.A.?” Ulrich added. “He was defeated, but we don’t know what will happen if...”

“The X.A.N.A. problem has been resolved!” Odd grumbled. “The last thing we need is resolved problems coming up again!”

“It’s pointless to dwell on this!” Jeremy yelled. “I’m not reactivating the supercomputer.”

The word ‘X.A.N.A.’ always gave them chills. The program Jeremy and Hopper launched in Carthage, and that Hopper had powered by sacrificing himself, had it really been powerful enough to exterminate each fragment of the dreaded artificial intelligence?

Suddenly, Odd got up and swung the bedroom door wide open. Eva Skinner fell to the floor...

“What are you doing there?” he asked, surprised.

“Nothing!” the young girl responded with a large smile. “I was looking for Aelita. I was going to knock, but I heard yells and nonstop talking about a supercomputer. What were you talking about, anyway?”

“Oh...nothing, nothing...” Jeremy answered immediately.

Odd cast a glance at his friend and said, “Come on...! She helped us yesterday afternoon, we can trust her, can’t we?”

This could be the moment to explain our little mysteries, don't you think?"

"Ok!" Yumi said. "But we're counting on you, Eva. Do you promise not to say anything to anyone?"

"Promise!"

In his apartment, Grigory Nictapulus tossed a bone to Hannibal. The hound immediately threw itself onto the rug, hungry. Then, the man concentrated once again on the screens with a sneer: "But of course, children...! Go on, go to the supercomputer, I won't tell anyone either... Scout's honour!"

10

AN ADDRESS AND A NIGHTMARE



The small group crossed the park at Kadic. It was five in the evening, and the sun was setting behind the tips of the trees.

“Aren’t you cold, Eva?” asked Odd. “You haven’t closed your jacket.”

“I’m used to it” the young girl replied with a smile.

“I thought you came from California where it’s really hot!”

Jeremy waved to them to keep quiet. At this time, the park was deserted, but it was impossible to be truly sure. And no-one must ever know of the existence of the secret passage. They turned towards the Hermitage until the back of the villa was no longer visible between the snow-covered trees. Then,

Jeremy indicated a point on the ground where the snow was finer.

“We’re here!” he said. “Help me dig it out?”

Odd came forward with confidence. He was ready to do anything to impress Eva! He kneeled down in the snow and started to scratch at full speed with his fingers.

“Hey, watch it!” cried Ulrich, being hit with ice crystals square in the face.

Yumi and Aelita burst out laughing.

Finally, Odd cleared off a manhole cover from under the snow. “Come on, we’re going down now!”

Jeremy gave his friend a suspicious look, “What do you mean WE’RE going down? Odd, shouldn’t you go back to your dorm? You’re still being punished, right?”

“Jim left to go sleep in his room, so for me, the path is clear!”

“Alright then, let’s go!” replied Yumi and Ulrich while sliding off the manhole cover.

Everyone entered the tunnel and guided Eva towards the runoff canals. A foul smell took them by the throat, and from time to time, a rat would run in front of them, flicking its horrible pink tail.

Odd slyly observed Eva. She didn’t seem very surprised by this repugnant show. America must be a strange country if a girl doesn’t make a fuss about entering a sewer with such a

horrible odour and with rats everywhere. Even Yumi seemed quite fearful the first time around...

As soon as they climbed up to the iron bridge, Odd put a hand on Eva's shoulder. "Isn't it spectacular? Look at all the snow there is on the roof of the factory!"

"And hope it doesn't fall on us from above!" responded Yumi, pointing out the "*Danger*" panels hung on the doorway that closed off the route behind them. "Didn't you ever wonder if these panels were true?"

"They just serve to scare off intruders!" Jeremy reassured her. "Quick, let's go inside, because it's freezing out here!"

They gave Eva a tour of the factory and each of its three underground floors. The young girl looked all around calmly and walked confidently as if she had already been there millions of times. When they arrived at the supercomputer room, Jeremy took a seat and pointed to the metallic circle.

"This is a holographic projector" he explained. "And this structure here above it projects an image in 3D of Lyoko, with a complete layout of the places. This is how I can see the exact position of my friends and X.A.N.A.'s monsters."

"X.A.N.A.?" asked Eva immediately.

"Yes. Well that, you know, it's a long story... I discovered this place myself by coincidence. I was curious, so I turned on the supercomputer. This is how I discovered that it gave life to a virtual world, Lyoko, and that in this world, there was a wonderful, little elf..."

Aelita blushed, pinched him, then murmured, “That was me...”

“But Aelita wasn’t the only inhabitant on Lyoko” Jeremy continued. “There was also X.A.N.A., a devious being who had the means to control monsters. But most notably, X.A.N.A. was so powerful that he could use particular places on Lyoko, like the towers, to access our world through electrical appliances and cause irreparable damage.”

“This is why Ulrich, Odd and I started to use the scanners to enter Lyoko. We became cybernetic warriors. We could battle X.A.N.A.” Yumi added.

“And they managed to free me from Lyoko” Aelita continued. “And in doing so, helped me become a normal girl again...”

“And then, we continued our struggle up until we destroyed X.A.N.A. for good” concluded Odd. “And we shut down the supercomputer.”

Eva asked with a little smile, “But then, this X.A.N.A. wasn’t very strong if kids like you managed to battle him!”

“Exactly!” Odd replied. “In the end, he was only a stupid computer program!”

Jeremy glared at him and explained to Eva, “In reality, it wasn’t so easy, because without Professor Hopper, Aelita’s father and inventor of Lyoko, we would never have succeeded. And X.A.N.A. caused us a lot of concern. Once, he even possessed one of our friends, William Dunbar, and transformed him into a monster.”

“You mean that he can take control of human beings?”

Eva let out, stunned.

“He can indeed when he activates the towers” answered Yumi. “But fortunately, we are always aware of it!”

This time, Eva was no longer smiling...

Yumi sprawled out on Aelita’s bed, then settled in close to her. Jeremy also sat by their side.

“Did you see Eva’s face?” exclaimed Yumi.

“Well, put yourself in her place!” Jeremy explained. “In barely an hour, we had her see the factory and gave her a super twisted summary of all our adventures! It’s normal that she’d be overwhelmed, don’t you think?”

“Yes...maybe” responded Yumi pensively.

Aelita decided to change the subject, “By the way, what are we going to do with the file that we found in the principal’s desk? Hey, Jeremy! There must definitely be another way to decipher the codes, what do you think?”

He picked up the envelope and started to leaf through the pages.

“It’s not so simple!” he announced. “Look, Hoppix is a very low-level programming language... It could practically serve as an instruction manual for a household electrical appliance, and...”

He observed the face of his two friends and smiled, “Well, it’s difficult to know what the program will do once it’s run!

And the only way to try it out would be to turn on the super-computer, which is out of the question..."

Suddenly, while leafing past a page, Jeremy stopped abruptly. He dropped the page and, with trembling hands, showed the girls the small piece of yellowed paper that he had just found.

Yumi and Aelita moved in closer to him.

"It's an address. In Brussels" Aelita said.

"It's Hertz's handwriting" explained the young boy. "The paper was hidden in the file, but it was so small that I didn't notice it."

"In your opinion, what does it mean?" asked Yumi. They looked at it, perplexed.

"No idea!" sighed Jeremy.

"Alright!" Yumi spoke. "If this piece of paper was in there, it wasn't by chance. It definitely has something to do with these papers and the professor, don't you think?"

"We should go verify it!"

"It's Friday!" Yumi remembered. "Ulrich and me could leave tomorrow morning. I'll tell my parents that I'm staying at Kadic this weekend with a friend..."

"And take a trip all alone to Brussels?" replied Jeremy. "To another country? Come on, Yumi, remember how that went the last time?"

Indeed, the day before the end of Christmas break, the small group crossed half of France to research a mysterious man, Philippe Broulet. He was the one who revealed the ex-

istence of the secret room in the Hermitage. But there was a big stumbling block on their return home. An overzealous ticket inspector called the police, because the travellers were 'unaccompanied minors.' It was a bad adventure!

Yumi exhaled, "We'll be extra careful... And besides, it's only two hours by train. It'll be fine!"

"But what are you hoping to find?" insisted Jeremy.

"The first time, we found the secret room. We could make an important discovery, who knows?"

During the evening, Ulrich patiently listened to Yumi in the lunchroom. Then, he said, "A weekend, you and me, the two of us?"

"Yes."

"In Brussels?"

"Yes."

Ulrich smiled while thinking about the special words *you and I are more than just friends* that he had held onto several days before.

"I'm totally down with that!" he exclaimed, satisfied.

Odd, who was finishing eating his second chicken escalope, mumbled with his mouth full, "Pfft, it's not fair! I wanna go too!"

"Hey, first of all, you're being punished!" Ulrich reminded him. "I'm sorry, but only us two should go, Yumi and me. We're the only ones who look older than our age!"

Ulrich was in heaven! And Yumi also seemed happy...

Ulrich stood up and said, “Ok! Let me just phone my parents! I haven’t spoken to them in a long time, and if they call the school tomorrow when I’m not there, I’ll be caught! If I call them tonight, they’ll leave me in peace for three or four days!”

He left the lunchroom, greeted Jim who was waiting for Odd in the hallway to take him back to his room, then he headed towards the deserted park. The schoolboy didn’t have a jacket, and the cold was intense. He was dying of impatience... A trip with Yumi! An adventure alone with her! What more could he dream of?

He grabbed his phone and called home, “Hello, Dad? It’s me, Ulrich.”

On the other end of the line, the voice was blunt. Father and son hadn’t spoken for a week, and the man seemed angry. The atmosphere at home seemed to get worse and worse...

“Ah, Ulrich! Are you doing well at school? Did you get any bad grades?”

The schoolboy sensed the anger growing. His father would truly never change: school and grades! Nothing else would interest him!

“Normal...” he responded.

“What do you mean by ‘normal’?” his father retorted. “Did you get any bad grades, yes or no?”

“Normal grades, Dad...”

“You mean 'normal' like your inability to get a good grade? Your...”

Ulrich heard his mother start to holler, “LEAVE HIM ALONE! Don't you get that you're getting on his back too much?”

“I'M NOT GETTING ON ANYONE'S BACK!” cried her husband, bursting their eardrums. “IT'S MY RIGHT TO KNOW IF...”

“Dad, stop!” sighed Ulrich. “Everything's fine. Period.” His parents had already stopped listening to him!

“IT'S YOUR FAULT IF HE NEVER CALLS!” accused his mother.

“IT'S YOUR FAULT IF OUR SON NEVER DOES ANYTHING!” responded his father.

Ulrich listened to their worsening argument in silence. He heard the noise of chairs, then a fist slamming down on the table... He sighed and hung up without saying goodbye. After this 'joyous' family discussion, his parents wouldn't be calling him with anything new for a good amount of time. At least he could leave in peace...

Lyoko. This time, Aelita was in the forest sector. She was surrounded by immense trees, all identical, pointing towards the yellow sky. Not a rustle of leaves, nor the slightest breeze. She had retaken her elf form and felt completely disoriented, like each time she travelled from the real world to the virtual one.

She turned around and saw the Scyphozoa, the monster of X.A.N.A. that resembled a gigantic transparent cone and was made of glass and metal. Its slimy, pink hair was floating inside of the cone and was partly hidden by the eye of X.A.N.A. There were also its tentacles, moving smoothly through the air.

Aelita started to run, as the Scyphozoa was the most dangerous creature their enemy had at his command: it aspired to take her memories... The young girl didn't want to lose her memory again!

She rushed between the tentacles, but the humming of the Scyphozoa transformed into a muffled growl. While continuing to run, Aelita threw a glance behind her. The monster had transformed into a dog, an enormous hound, with a gaping mouth and fangs stained with blood.

It soon went after her... It was now simply a matter of seconds...

Aelita didn't notice that the ground was suddenly disappearing under her feet, transforming into a pool of water the same ochre colour as the sky. She fell, screaming...

She opened her eyes wide. She had had a nightmare again! The same pyjamas were on her, covered in mud, and smelling of the same repugnant odour of the sewers. But she wasn't in the sewers...

This time, she was lying down under a skylight on a cement floor. The light was coming from just above her and left the rest of the tunnel in darkness.

She stood up, trembling, and took several steps. Light appeared in front of her feet and vanished behind her. She continued to walk.

Was this still a dream or was this reality? Had she sleep-walked again? Slowly, the tunnel shrunk, the walls became square, and the young girl recognised the place: the Hermitage.

While she was sleeping, she had actually snuck into the secret passage at Kadic that passed through the sewers and arrived at the Hermitage. But why did she do that? And why were the dogs that attacked Kiwi on the side of X.A.N.A.'s monsters in her dreams?

Aelita felt that something was eluding her. She stopped and reflected: to head for the Hermitage at night alone wasn't a good idea, especially if the mysterious man who had assaulted Odd's father was around in the area. It would be better to go back to sleep in the safety of her own bed.

She thought of her past and figured that she should first speak with Richard...

When Ulrich and Yumi got off the train at Brussels, they were swallowed by a wave of people. The lobby was gigantic, all in marble and glass. Businessmen were coming and going in suits and ties, armed with mobile phones and leather briefcases. Brussels was giving off an atmosphere of a very dynamic city.

11

A MONSTER AT YUMI'S HOUSE



“You’ve already been here?” Ulrich asked.

“Yes, several times.”

“Perfect, because I’ve never stepped foot here! What are we doing?”

“I’d say breakfast first” Yumi proposed. “Then afterwards, we take the metro to find this road... What was it called, again?”

“Rue Camille Lemonnier.”

“Perfect.”

They piled onto the bench in the station bistro and had two delicious croissants. Then, they embarked on the metro

after having carefully studied the timetable: two changeovers; yellow line, then green line. While they were trying to get a grip on the map, Ulrich almost lost sight of Yumi, pushed by a crowd of businessmen vigorously fighting their way along the platform. He grabbed her by an arm and breathed:

“This whole place is crazy! Completely crazy!”

“It’s normal!” his friend responded. “This is currently the headquarters of the European Commission!”

After finishing their voyage, squashed together like sardines, the two friends walked hand in hand down the large city roads. The crowd seemed to have dispersed and they could finally breathe the quiet and serene air, up to the point that Ulrich almost forgot that they were making this trip to help Aelita. It was like a holiday, for him and Yumi. Just the two of them, in a splendid city... Could he ever ask for more?

Rue Lemonnier was an ordinary road with wide footpaths lined with trees and beautiful buildings. The building they were looking for dated back to before the war, with a white, broken façade and high windows. And on the side, there was an intercom with several doorbells.

“What name is written on the paper?” Yumi asked.

“Madame Lassalle” Ulrich responded. “She could be a friend of Professor Hertz.”

“Lassalle, there it is!” Yumi exclaimed when she spotted the name on the intercom. “Let’s ring it!”

No response. The young girl rang again...still no response...

“Try another doorbell” Ulrich proposed.

They tried all of them, in vain.

“What bad luck!” Yumi muttered.

“Hey, you kids!” a voice called to them.

They turned around. A small old man with a funny hat came towards them, pushing an old red bicycle.

“Sorry,” Yumi asked him “are you talking to us?”

“Yes!” responded the man while walking tiny steps up to the intercom. “It’s useless to ring, nobody will respond.”

“Why is that?” Ulrich wondered while looking at the long list of names. “All these people live here, don’t they? We’re looking for this lady, Madame Lassalle...”

“Young man,” the old man smiled “I’ve lived on this road since 1936. I saw Rue Lemonnier be bombed and reduced to cinders during the war. And I can say with complete certainty that nobody has ever lived in this building. It belonged to the government before. Then after the war, it was bought by an American company. But nobody has ever come to live or even work here, except for a few short weeks...”

“But a property like this must be worth a fortune!” Yumi cried, stupefied.

“You can say that, young lady, but...” the old man’s voice dropped in pitch and confided: “In my opinion, it wasn’t a company that bought it, but rather the secret service. As far as I know, at least...”

"The secret service?!" Ulrich repeated, not able to believe his ears.

"I know, I know... You're undoubtedly thinking of James Bond or some other agent like that, but I'm telling you, kids, that the secret service really exists. And believe me, they were bustling with activity during the war!"

"Thank you for coming to talk to us, sir!" Yumi responded, smiling.

"No problem at all! It's a pleasure to be able to talk to someone now and then!"

Ulrich laughed as he watched the old man leave.

"That poor man was a little shaken, wasn't he?"

"Maybe, but in any case, he was right: nobody responded. So, what do we do now?"

The *Café au Lait* was a modern café, with a skinny black counter, and some small tables. Aelita arrived slightly late and found Richard already seated, his palm-computer on the table next to a cup of hot tea. He seemed wiped out.

"Have you been waiting long?" she asked. "I had a few problems leaving Kadic."

"Don't worry!" he responded with a smile. "Are you having anything to drink?"

Aelita ordered a hot chocolate and sat next to Richard, in a way that allowed her to see the screen of his palm-computer. It still showed the famous Hoppix codes. Were they the same ones they found in Professor Hertz' dossier?

Or were they part of the same program? She had to remember to ask Jeremy about it...

While she was concentrating on the screen, Richard stared at her. Then, he put his hand on hers and said:

“Can I ask you why you wanted to see me?”

“I thought it was the least I could do!” she justified. “After all, the other night must have been a real shock for you. I mean, you were expecting to find a girl about your age! Instead of that...”

“I still can’t believe that you’re...her. The Aelita that I knew, I mean. You’re certainly identical, but... No, it’s impossible!” he continued in a lower voice. “We all grow up! I’ve gone mad...”

Aelita squeezed the young man’s fingers:

“You’re right, Richard, I really am Aelita, but I haven’t grown up. I’d love to tell you everything, but I’m still not sure if I can fully trust you... I just ask you to understand. I’m scared...”

The moment had come to explain to Richard why she had come to see him. During the Christmas holidays, for reasons she hadn’t yet understood, Aelita had a bout of amnesia and all her memories of Lyoko had disappeared. Jeremy and the others had patiently helped her to recover the memories thanks to a video diary in which they recounted everything that happened since the young student had discovered the abandoned factory.

But before that? The girl had no memory of the period in which she lived in the Hermitage with her father or was in the same class as Richard at Kadic Academy. She didn't even remember the face of her mother, Anthea. Richard, however, could give her a hand in that area.

The young man was happy to tell her everything. He started by talking about their class and teachers. Aelita and Richard were the best of friends, like she was now with Jeremy. But the young man reminded her of a number of details: the long afternoons Hopper spent helping them with their homework in the large lounge room in the Hermitage, school excursions, their love of life...

"Back then, you were a really weird girl!" Richard said. "Sometimes, you'd disappear for entire afternoons, with no explanation. You told me that you were working with your father, but that it was a top secret project and you couldn't tell anyone about it, not even me. And then, during the last year of school that we spent together, you started to visit a new friend. You called him Mister X. You said that he was very kind and very lonely, and that you had to help him discover his purpose in the world. When you talked about him, your eyes would shine. I was crazy in love with you myself and very jealous! I imagined that this Mister X was a young foreigner that you had fallen completely in love with... And you had much less time to play with me... And then your visits to Mister X became more and more frequent, and for some time, your father stopped coming to classes, and so did you.

Up to the point where, one sad day, you disappeared. We had a history test and we had studied together, I was waiting for you but you never came. That afternoon, I ran to the Hermitage, but I found the doors and windows locked. Then, I never saw you again, never again...until the other night..."

It was June 6, 1994, the day when Hopper had finished his work on the Lyoko project and fled into the virtual world, taking his daughter with him. And he shut the supercomputer down, making it remain inactive for several years, until Jeremy's arrival.

Aelita regarded Richard, whose eyes became clouded. On his palm-computer's screen, the Hoppix codes were still streaming. Someone had set them off like an alarm signal to guide Richard to the Hermitage to help them. Her father thought that Richard was the right person to look after her in difficult moments. Aelita agreed completely, and guessed that she could trust him...

She began to speak to him about Lyoko...

Hiroki Ishiyama had been awake for two hours. He was lying down in his room, watching a cartoon on television for the umpteenth time; he now knew it by heart.

During the week, his sister Yumi spent all her days at school, but on the weekends, they were usually together and she played with him. But today, he was alone. His parents were sleeping in and Kiwi, since he was injured, slept from morning 'til night. Hiroki was bored...

Suddenly, the little boy heard the dog bark downstairs. He seemed angry. Several seconds later, Hiroki raised his head, because the growls became louder, almost terrorised.

The dog's barking increased, then nothing. Hiroki leapt up and approached his bedroom door, still closed. The house was quiet, maybe a little too quiet. He opened the door without making a noise and stayed behind it, ears open.

There were footsteps, then a noise of heavy shoes on the staircase. It wasn't his parents; they had their shoes off. Nobody could enter a Japanese house with shoes on their feet...except for a burglar.

Hiroki held his breath and didn't move a muscle. The footsteps continued up the steps and the stranger walked along the hallway, passing by Yumi's room as well as his, and then headed to their parents' room.

The young boy heard a voice saying:

"Oh, but you don't remember me?"

Hiroki heard his mother let out a small, frightened cry, then nothing.

Distraught, he exited his room and down the hall he saw a tall silhouette wrapped in a coat. Electric wires ran down his long, gloved fingers, relayed to Hiroki's parents' heads. The poor adults were still in their pyjamas, and seemed unconscious...

Hiroki didn't know if it was a man or a monster, but either way he was too small to confront him alone. He needed help!

He discreetly headed to the staircase. In the living room, Kiwi was unmoving in his basket, but still breathing: the mysterious man had made him go to sleep. Yumi's brother slipped his shoes on, grabbed the small dog, then fled.

But who could he call? And who could help him?

Odd had just hung up the phone; his mother had called him to say that his father was doing better. He had now been discharged from the hospital and had come home. He had just gone back to bed when he heard knocking at his door. It was Yumi's little brother. He was holding Kiwi in his arms, and seemed terrified.

"Hiroki!" Odd cried, while the dog licked his face. "What are you doing here? Hey, you shouldn't have brought him here. And...Jim?" he said, scrutinising the hallway.

Luckily, nobody was around. Hiroki jumped from one foot to the other, then in a desperate voice he said:

"ODD, I NEED HELP! A MONSTER TOOK MY PARENTS!"

"Speak more quietly!" Odd replied. "And explain to me what happened!"

The little boy managed to babble out somewhat of an explanation. Odd contemplated the story. Yumi's brother wasn't the kind of person to invent such crazy stories... And what he recounted seemed strangely like what happened to his own father earlier...

"Let's go find Jeremy and we'll run over to your place!" Odd proposed.

“But I want to see my sister!” the child protested. “Where is she?”

“It’s a long story, Hiroki... Just trust me and come on!”

The little genius was in his room, concentrating on Waldo Schaeffer’s dossier. Odd and Hiroki burst in, and Odd summarised the situation in two words. While the boys headed down the hallway once more, Jeremy’s phone rang. It was Ulrich calling from Brussels.

“What did Jeremy say?” Yumi asked, once the conversation had ended.

“He suggested we take some photos of the lock and send them to him” Ulrich responded. “This afternoon or tonight, he’ll explain what tools we need to buy and how to pick the lock.”

“Pick it?” the young girl protested. “But that’s illegal! This time, we’re risking ending up in prison for good! If it really is a building belonging to secret agents, you’d have to think that there are cameras and microphones hidden in it! And...”

Ulrich interrupted, smiling: “And especially, that means we’ll have to stay the night here... And I don’t believe that minors can book a hotel room...”

“That’s not a problem!” Yumi responded. “I already told you that I often come to Brussels. A friend of my mother lives here, a very nice woman. I’m sure that she’ll welcome us and won’t say anything to my parents!”

“That’s perfect then!” Ulrich cried. “So we’ll take a couple of photos of this lock, then we’ll make the most of our day!”

This agenda seemed to please the two adventuring teens...

Arriving at his house, Hiroki slowly put the key into the lock and signalled to Odd and Jeremy not to talk.

The students followed him, taking their shoes off. Hiroki then silently placed Kiwi on the couch in the living room.

“Can I do something for you?” Hiroki’s mother asked as she exited the kitchen, looking very elegant.

The boy also saw his father, also dressed elegantly, in a vest and cravat.

Jeremy wrung his hands together while thinking of something intelligent to say.

“Can I do something for you?” she repeated with a large smile.

“Mummy, Mummy!” Hiroki cried, jumping to hug her neck. “Are you ok?”

“I’m doing very well! Can I do something for you?”

Jeremy and Odd timidly greeted Mister Ishiyama, who responded with a wan smile, eyes vague.

“If you don’t need anything, I’m going back to the kitchen!” Yumi’s mother announced in a monotone voice.

The boys found themselves alone in the living room, perplexed.

“I didn’t lie!” Hiroki said. “There really was a monster!”

"I don't doubt that" Jeremy responded, suspicious. "In fact, haven't you noticed anything strange?"

His companions shook their heads. Then he explained:

"Hiroki, it seems that your parents didn't recognise you, and they didn't even ask us for news about Yumi."

"As if they were completely confused!" the boy nodded.

"They're the same symptoms my father had!" Odd sighed. "Memory loss and saying strange things!"

"Let's go have a look around!" Hiroki proposed. "In the state my parents are in, they won't even notice!"

They climbed the stairs and entered the parents' room: the bed was made, the floor clean and shiny. They observed the smallest corners, even under the bed... Not a speck of dust nor muddy shoeprints.

The young boys quickly inspected Yumi and Hiroki's rooms, but in both of them, everything was still where it had been.

"Let's have a look at the garden" Odd proposed.

They said goodbye to Mister and Missus Ishiyama, then left. Kiwi followed them, reeling.

"Hiroki," Jeremy asked "try to tell me everything you know about this man who looked like a monster in precise detail."

Hiroki closed his eyes to concentrate better, then detailed the tall silhouette he had seen in a dark coat and gloves with cables on them.

"Kiwi barked" he recounted. "Then, he fell asleep all of a sudden. The man must have used a sleeping pill."

“He must have been prepared to come to the house!” Odd added.

Suddenly, Kiwi’s growls stopped them. The dog sniffed the grass in the garden and growled, scared. The young boys approached and saw a shoeprint, deeply rooted in the soil. It was undoubtedly a large shoe with a thick sole. Then, to the side, troubling canine paw prints...

12

NOTHING BUT MYSTERIES...



The large clock that sat upon the wall of Kadic Academy struck midnight. Jeremy heard the dismal sound from his room. He then turned on the light, because obviously, he wasn't going to get any sleep...

He got up and placed himself at his desk. He took a notebook and a sheet of paper, than started to calmly list all the problems that have presented themselves and the information they'd collected so far.

1. Professor Hertz: what does she know about Hopper? Why is she keeping a file on him? What do the codes mean? And the address in Brussels?

He sighed. Nothing but questions...and he'd only just started!

2. The man with dogs: who is he? What does he want? Why did he attack Odd and Yumi's parents? Who will be the next victim?

This thought made him freeze. His parents lived far away from Kadic. Maybe that would keep them safe...or maybe not... After all, Odd's parents also live in a different city. The student preferred not to think about it.

3. Richard: why did so much code appear on his computer? Was it Hopper who sent them to him? And why does Aelita treat him like some sort of god?

Jeremy sighed and erased the last sentence. It wasn't exactly correct. It was true that his heart had almost stopped when the girl had told him that she saw Richard in a café that morning... But for the moment, it was of no importance.

4. Hopper: what is the significance of the video he pushed us to find? And what must we do to help Aelita find her mother?

5. X.A.N.A.

As he wrote these initials, the hand holding the pen stopped dead. X.A.N.A. had been destroyed, that, at least, they were sure of... But what if that wasn't the case?

Odd hadn't managed to sleep either. He couldn't stop seeing the darkened eyes of Mister Ishiyama superimposed over those of his father after he'd been attacked.

Usually, the student was always in high spirits, but recent events were starting to seriously trouble him. Someone had rang the doorbell and lured his father into the garden to do something to him. Odd was now convinced that it wasn't a kidnapping attempt, if not the same thing would have happened to Yumi's parents. The important question was therefore to find out what the man with two dogs wanted...what was he doing with cabled gloves? How did he manage to erase his image from the video Jeremy had recorded in the Hermitage?

Suddenly, he remembered the strange memory card that his mother had given to him at the hospital. He leapt out of bed, then began to rummage through his jacket pockets. He took out the small, black, plastic rectangle... He observed it. Nothing. No writing, just three or four golden marks on one of the sides.

Odd sighed; he knew nothing about technical things, but Eva, on the other hand, seemed rather gifted in that area. It was really thanks to her that he'd discovered the image of the man with dogs on the Hermitage surveillance video! So she could surely help him discover what was hidden on this plastic thing! And then, tomorrow was Sunday, an opportunity for him to visit her... He might even be able to meet her parents and stay at her house for a while... Fantastic!

He rifled through the mess on his desk to find the scrap of paper on which he'd written Eva's address and phone number: *Rue André René*. It was only two o'clock in the morning,

but he still decided to call Jeremy, who immediately picked up.

“Apparently you haven’t managed to sleep either!”

“No” Jeremy said. “I was in the middle of studying how to force the lock on the apartment for Ulrich and Yumi.”

“Our little computer hacker!” Odd laughed. “I just wanted to tell you that you won’t see me tomorrow morning. I’m going to see Eva.”

Jeremy’s voice immediately became more sombre: “What do you have in mind?”

“Nothing, nothing, don’t worry...”

“Hey, Odd, you’re not going to do some films about Eva, by any chance?”

“And what if I am? She’s a great girl, isn’t she?”

Odd didn’t talk about the memory card, because if Jeremy had seen it, he would immediately set to work on it and he wouldn’t have an excuse to go to Eva’s house anymore...

“So for that reason, you intend to go behind Jim Morales’ back again?!” Jeremy questioned.

“You really are a genius, Einstein!” Odd responded before hanging up.

Sunday morning arrived quickly. Dark clouds hung heavy with the threat of rain, but that didn’t deter Odd!

Rue André René was large and long, bordered by tall trees that shook in the violent wind.

Two rows of small, tidy houses with black roofs and wooden walls, all painted white, lined up in front of the boy's gaze.

What rotten weather! Odd thought, shivering. Suddenly, lightning lit up the sky, and a large drop of rain fell onto his nose. Then another, then another...

He shot beneath the trees like an arrow, being very careful not to slip on the footpath that had been dirtied by sleet in previous days. He then looked for the numbers written on the letterboxes. Thirty... Twenty-eight... The rain intensified, and in but a few seconds, he found himself soaked to the bone, his blond hair stuck to his face, and his clothing weighing a tonne. He accelerated again, upset about having to present himself to Eva like this, but he no longer had a choice. It was impossible to return to Kadic in this torrential rain...!

Eighteen...the 1 and 8 were painted in red varnish. Odd jumped onto the doorstep, protected by a canopy. He rang. No response... He tried again, and afraid of not pressing hard enough, he tried a third time: *Driiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiing!*

Finally, the door opened. Eva was wearing a tight tracksuit. "Odd!" she said, smiling.

"Hi!" he responded. "I was just passing by, and it started to rain, so..."

Suddenly, he realised that it was only half past eight in the morning. He murmured, feeling uneasy:

"I haven't woken up your parents, have I?"

"No, no... I'm alone. My parents are at work."

Working, on a Sunday? Odd thought to himself.

“Would you mind if I come in for a bit, to dry myself off?” he said, embarrassed.

“Please!” Eva responded. “Come in! You’re drenched...get undressed!”

Odd stopped dead, unable to respond, which was rare for him! Get undressed? Did she really just ask him to...undress?

“Um...would you, by any chance, have some clothes I could borrow from your father?”

“No!”

He looked all around him. Actually, it seemed like a number of things were missing from this house. Moreover, it was barely furnished. The front door faced a small hallway that led directly into the living room, and an empty room that had nothing but a laptop sitting on the floor. It was the same thing for the kitchen: no sink, no furniture, no oven, and no stove. Four walls and within them, completely empty. Only a few gas and water pipes hanging from the ceiling. As for the boiler, it was just fixed to the wall.

“Where’s the bathroom?” Odd asked, astonished.

“Over there!” the girl indicated. “At the end of the hallway.”

The hallway opened onto two empty rooms that didn’t even have beds in them. In one of them, there was just a pink suitcase, open, and full of clothes. And in the bathroom, there was still a sink, a toilet and a towel. Odd used it to fix his hair.

When it came to his jacket, sweatshirt, pants, and even his shoes and socks, everything had to be dried. Only his T-shirt

remained dry, so he decided to keep it on. He got undressed, took the memory card, wrapped the towel around his waist to hide his underwear and returned to the living room. Eva was waiting for him, seated on the floor with her laptop on her knees.

She looked at Odd humorously. "You're almost naked!" she murmured. "I don't think that's very good..."

"Hm... Me neither." Odd nodded. "But with drenched clothing on, I could catch a cold!"

"Wait!"

Eva stood, disappeared into one of the rooms and came back with a fluoro pink tracksuit. Odd took it, sighing. The tracksuit was very tight and the pants far too short... Nothing like the James Bond look! When she saw him in that getup, Eva laughed at him!

He tried to distract her attention: "Your house's décor is... um, a little refined, isn't it?"

But he then held his tongue, because after all, what did he know about her family?

"Anyway," he said to save himself. "you've just moved in, it's normal. If you want, you could come spend some time in the dorms, waiting for your stuff to get here, the beds and all that..."

"I'm perfectly fine here" Eva responded coldly.

"But of course!" he quickly said. "Uh...me too! I like it here a lot!"

Odd sat near Eva, then showed her the memory card.

“Eva, I’d like to ask you for help with this thing. I found it, and I don’t know how to use it.”

The girl seized the card and observed it with shining eyes, as if she could see within it. Then, she slipped it into the laptop and typed on some keys.

“It’s just a video!” she announced in a neutral voice. “Ok, I’m starting it.”

Odd held his breath as an image appeared on the screen.

It was a lovely-looking woman, dressed in a white shirt. Her hands and feet were tied to a wooden chair, and thick, red hair fell messily over her shoulders. A man’s hand, wearing a black glove, suddenly placed itself in front of the woman, brandishing the front page of a newspaper, *THE INVESTIGATOR*. The date had been highlighted in yellow: *2nd of May 1994*.

Odd covered his mouth with his hand, stupefied. Then, he exclaimed:

“This video is way old! It was just before Aelita went to Lyoko with her father! And this woman must be...”

Red hair, the shape of the nose and eyes...but of course, it was Anthea, Aelita’s mother! Held prisoner!

The newspaper disappeared from the screen, revealing the woman once again. She began to speak:

“I’m doing fine, Waldo. Don’t worry about me, they’re keeping me prisoner, but everything will be...”

Her face suddenly changed to a look of infinite sadness. She slowly bowed her head and began to cry.

“How is Aelita doing? It’s been years since I’ve seen her... She must be going to primary school now... Has she grown up? I want to kiss her so much...”

The woman sobbed, when a masculine voice ordered from off screen:

“Finish it. Say what you know and that’s enough!”

Anthea raised her head, her face full of hate as she turned towards the man that spoke.

“Waldo,” she continued, crying “these men are making me ask you to continue to work, to take down Project Carthage. If you do it, they’ll free me and then we can be together, you, me and Aelita, like a family again...”

Suddenly, the woman raised her head, frightened, and quickly whispered:

“Don’t do it, Waldo! They’ll never let me go and they’re trying to kill you. Let Carthage go and save yourself, get far away...”

The silhouette of a man then entered the image, hiding Anthea. There was a click, then the image disappeared in a shower of sparks...and the video stopped.

Odd almost knocked Eva’s laptop over. “We have to warn Jeremy and Aelita, and show them this video!” he cried, leaping up.

“No!” Eva responded in a clear tone.

“Don’t you understand?!” Odd protested. “That woman was Aelita’s mother, and now we know that she’s alive... Or that she was alive at least ten years ago, and that she was held captive! Jeremy could analyse the video and discover something!”

“No!” Eva repeated, also standing up.

“What has gotten into you?” Odd responded, stupefied.

The girl slipped a hand into her pocket. But when she took it back out again, it took Odd a few seconds to comprehend what she held in her hand...

This was crazy! Why would Eva have a switchblade knife, with a blade shining sinisterly but a few centimetres from his face?

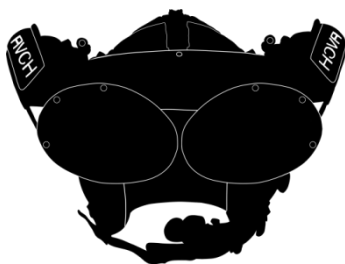
“You’re not going anywhere, stupid human!” she let out in a strange voice.

Eva’s lips moved, but her voice was no longer her own... It was distorted, as if it had been spoken directly from computer speakers. A masculine voice... A deep one.

Odd knew this voice all too well. It was that of their mortal enemy: X.A.N.A.

13

THE REPLICA



Ulrich and Yumi awoke early; also leaving a note for the Ishiyamas' friend. She was a kind woman in her thirties, with a slightly hippie look, and who had welcomed them without asking any questions.

She lived in the middle of the city. But the teens had to run from one hardware shop to the other during lousy weather to find the components that Jeremy described to them via email. Then, they sought refuge in Bois de la Cambre, a park near Rue Lemonnier, to proceed with the installation.

“A hundred and twenty-two Euros!” Ulrich sighed as he took the material out of his backpack “It would’ve cost us less to go back to Kadic and have Jeremy build this electronic thingy!”

“Instead of moaning, why don’t you give me a hand?” Yumi asked.

The instructions seemed complicated. They had bought an electric screwdriver, a series of needles and fine-tipped iron, a hammer drill, batteries and a bunch of other stuff. Now, they had to assemble everything to create what Jeremy called the “electronic lock pick”.

“Where did he learn how to do this stuff?” Ulrich asked, unscrewing the body of the drill to disassemble it.

“Jeremy said that he found it all on the Internet” Yumi explained. “Look here, he wrote: *position the needles on the closure pivot of the lock cylinder and give it large strikes in a way that will initiate a ball mechanism which...*”

“Ok, ok” Ulrich sighed. “It’s completely incomprehensible. But did he say anywhere where we need to insert this thing into the electronic thingy?”

“Ha ha!” the young girl replied. “I didn’t think that Jeremy wrote electronic thingy!”

The two lovebirds continued to work until around midday, sitting on a bench, in the icy cold. From time to time, Ulrich would observe Yumi: she was still in deep concentration. The day before had been so beautiful that he hadn’t found the right moment to talk sincerely with her. He didn’t want to wreck the magical atmosphere by risking starting a fight! Though she’d told him that it’d be better if they remain just friends, he really had trouble supporting the idea. So, he had waited to talk to her. And he was still waiting...

He thought of stopping for a moment to take her hands and look into her eyes. No, not yet. Not while they were passing screws and nuts to each other...! Later!

Yumi brushed the hair away from her forehead and finally announced: "That's good! This machine should be ready! You can take out the lock we bought. We're going to give it a try!"

That too was written in Jeremy's instructions: *using the electronic lock pick isn't simple, practise with it where nobody can see you!*

"A twenty-Euro lock straight out the window!" Ulrich groused while taking out the brand-new lock from his backpack and trying to use the electronic instrument to open it.

Jeremy had warned them... This operation wasn't at all evident to the naked eye! Ulrich gave up about half an hour later...

"I can't feel my hands anymore!" he groaned. "It's freezing cold, and if you ask me, we made a mistake while we were building it! This thing will never open!"

"Wait," Yumi said "I'm going to try it!"

She took the lock in her hands and as soon as she did so, the lock pick engaged the switch. Then, she gave it a small whack with her fist, and... Click! The pistons came back... and the lock opened!

"Beginner's luck!" Ulrich muttered, annoyed.

“It’s all in the movement!” his friend laughed. “In any case, now I know that I can become a burglar! Come on, let’s move! We need to get back to Kadic tonight!”

Rue Camille Lemonier was deserted, and even the café on the corner was closed. As they reached number fourteen, Ulrich let out a sigh of relief; at least they were at less risk of getting in trouble.

“Let’s hurry, Yumi” he said as he passed her the electronic lock pick. “If someone sees us and calls the police, we’re going to get into real trouble...”

“Don’t worry!” she responded confidently.

She put the device to work and not long after, they heard the metallic sound of the lock opening. They entered.

The building’s lobby faced a small landing reachable using a marble staircase with a fine forged iron railing. On one side they saw a wooden door, closed, from which a musty smell escaped.

“Nobody’s been here for centuries!” Ulrich observed.

“Have you noticed?” Yumi cut in. “There are no surveillance cameras. Maybe the owners aren’t really secret agents after all...”

The closed door had no name on it, nor a doorbell. After a brief moment of thought, they decided to investigate the general area. So, they adventured up the staircase...

The building was eight storeys high and each opened onto a hallway with no windows, arranged with four identical doors with neither numbers nor names. Most of the doors

were closed, and the only open ones showed completely empty apartments.

Arriving on the third floor, Ulrich and Yumi began to lose hope. And on the sixth, they were even more discouraged. They climbed up to the eighth floor at a running pace, soon ready to return to Kadic without having found anything.

“Nothing here either” Ulrich sighed, breathless. “What do we do now? Try to open each door one by one?”

“Wait, that one seems different to the others, look!” Yumi breathed, indicating to a door a little further away.

Ulrich approached it. Even though it was made of dark wood like the others, it had a more solid and massive aspect, and the lock seemed to be reinforced...

They examined it for a moment, then decided to try their device. Yumi's instinct may have been right! They tried the lock pick three times, and the lock opened! Ulrich opened the door wide... Both of their jaws practically dropped to the floor...

The apartment was just one large room that resembled an old office. The floor was covered with thick, beige carpet, and on the walls, there was horrible wallpaper in the same colour. Dozens of screens and electronic equipment, as well as other giant computers, sat on an immense steel table. The equipment was so cumbersome that it covered up part of the only window.

When Ulrich advanced, a thick cloud of dust rose from the carpet, making him sneeze.

He approached the table. On it, there were motorcycle helmets equipped with strange devices and gloves connected to wires that relayed to a computer. Then, on the side, there were several yellowed keyboards that were at least twenty years old, and large cathode ray tube monitors that must have weighed a tonne.

“If you ask me...” Yumi declared.

“Yes?”

“That’s a supercomputer prototype. Like the one at the old factory. And these helmets and gloves could be the predecessors to the scanners...”

“Are you kidding?” Ulrich replied nervously. “So you’re saying that this place is...an access point to Lyoko?”

“Not really. Maybe just a copy of Lyoko. I think that, technically, the exact term is ‘replica’.”

Yumi moved a large stack of paper from the desk, and freed a large black box adorned with a large lens on the front.

“This resembles the holographic projector that Jeremy uses to control our movements when we’re in the virtual world. And this other thing...”

She then indicated to a device composed of mirrors and cables relayed to the motorcycle helmets.

“This resembles the electronic thingy, as you call it, and it’s mounted on the scanners at the factory.”

Ulrich sat on the floor and ran his fingers through his hair, annoyed.

“That’s crazy!” he exclaimed. “What do you propose we do?”

“Seems clear to me!” Yumi responded, winking at him. “Turn everything on and see if I was right!”

“But...if it really is a replica, like you say,” Ulrich spluttered “X.A.N.A. could be inside it!”

“I don’t think so” his friend replied. “When Hopper sacrificed himself, he must have destroyed X.A.N.A. in all his forms, right? And then, in any case, we can leave the virtual world at any time by destroying these devices.

Yumi was very convincing. Ulrich ended up agreeing.

In Kadic’s cafeteria, Aelita quickly finished a glass of milk, then stood up. Jeremy hadn’t finished eating.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“Richard is waiting for me in the café we went to yesterday” the young girl blushed. “We have to continue our discussion.”

Jeremy felt his chest tighten: “I don’t understand what you find so interesting about him!”

“Come on, Jeremy! He was a classmate! He knew me before this whole thing started, before Lyoko and the super-computer! He always came over to my place, and he knows everything about a time in my life that I don’t remember anything about!”

“Yes, but well...” Jeremy muttered.

“Tell me, you aren’t a little...jealous, by any chance?” she said with a small smile.

“Jealous, me? Are you kidding? Jealous of that fool who doesn’t even know how to turn on a computer, and who...”

“Don’t exaggerate!” she retorted. “Ok, excuse me, but I have to go! I can’t be late!”

Jeremy watched Aelita and her tuft of red hair leave the cafeteria. He ended up eating all alone...

Suddenly, he realised that Odd hadn’t shown up for lunch, which was very strange, even unbelievable, seeing as he never misses a meal! Where did he go? With the storm that had hit the city, it was probable that he had gone out, and after all, Odd was a little wacky!

Jeremy had no desire to remain by himself in the cafeteria. So he quickly grabbed an apple and returned to his room. He did indeed have the intention of studying the strange Hoppix codes. With a little effort, he could maybe learn what they’re for.

He entered his room and remained immobile. Petrified... the dossier! It was no longer on his desk! And he hadn’t even made a copy!

He inspected the lock on the door: no trace of a break-in. The desk was covered with a thin layer of dust, except for where he had placed the file. Who had come into his room?

Normally, Professor Hertz spent her weekends at school, shut up in her room. At the end of the week, the staff building

was empty and quiet, and that allowed her to prepare her classes in peace.

However, today, she couldn't bring herself to concentrate. Images of Franz Hopper and her past haunted her. Was she right in confiding the Hopper, alias Waldo Schaeffer, file to the principal? At the time it had seemed like the best solution, because Delmas knew the outline of what happened, and she trusted him completely. But of course, she knew Jeremy! She knew he would stop at nothing to unveil a mystery...

The dossier had become too dangerous... Once again she thought of the apartment in Belgium. The prospect of the teens being able to find it terrorised her to the point that she'd rather not think about it all.

Stop thinking about these dark ideas, Susan! she told herself in a reassuring tone. *What happened to your cool-headedness? Don't forget: when you were twenty, you were known as the relentless, and now, you're afraid of confronting these thirteen-year-old kids?!*

It was useless to torture her mind in this way; the only thing that she could do was to act! She then stood from her chair and closed the physics book that she was trying in vain to consult. Then, she took the copies of the keys for the principal's office that she had secretly hidden in a drawer, and moved to exit the room.

She would just check to see if the dossier was still in its place, then leave. Always doubt, doubt everything. When she

was younger, this simple rule had saved her life many times...

She turned into the hallway that led into the principal's office and came face-to-face with Eva Skinner. She may have been wrong, but she could've sworn she saw the student leaving Delmas' office.

The young girl smiled widely, and began to speak. Her American accent had almost disappeared.

"I was looking for the principal" she said. "I knocked, but he didn't respond."

"I think he's taking a walk with his daughter" Hertz responded. "And you, don't you have to be at home, with your parents?"

"I came here to revise our Wednesday homework with my new friends" the young student replied, shrugging.

The professor watched Eva leave. She waited until she was out of sight before turning the handle of Delmas' office door. It was open. Had the principal forgotten to lock it?

Everything seemed in order in his office. She knew where Delmas was keeping the file: in the desk drawer, and its key was hidden in the penholder. But when she opened it, her heart began to pound...the drawer was empty.

"But...how?" she murmured.

She calmly opened the large metallic filing cabinet, then looked through the files in alphabetical order until she found the dossier labelled *Waldo Schaeffer*. So, the principal had simply decided to move it!

Hertz let out a big sigh, relieved.

Azure doors and rounded roofs like those on Chinese pagodas. Pathways that reached into the sky, like delicate coloured ribbons, intertwining around towers that were so high you couldn't see the top.

"This isn't Lyoko!" Ulrich said, confused.

"But look at us!" Yumi cried.

The young girl was dressed in the geisha costume that she always wore on Lyoko, with her face painted white and her hair held back by pins! She was wearing her elegant *kimono* tied to her waist by an *obi* sash. Ulrich also wore his usual samurai outfit: a short kimono, and on his feet, socks and traditional *geta*, a sandal whose strap separates the big toe from the others. The only difference was that the student no longer wore his sabre, or *katana*, on his hip.

"It looks like we're unarmed..." he sighed.

"I don't like that at all!" Yumi responded in a metallic voice.

Her voice was distorted by the speakers that they'd both inserted in their motorcycle helmets. The rudimentary instruments didn't appear to allow them to completely enter this replica of Lyoko. The two friends' bodies were still in reality, in the room filled with computers.

"Well, if things go badly, we can always remove the devices and go back to Earth, right?" Ulrich consoled.

"Try and see!" Yumi said.

Ulrich placed his hands on his throat, where the helmet was attached. Nothing. His fingers, covered by the gloves, gave him a feeling of smooth skin, and they followed the contour of the face as if there had never been any helmet on his head. He felt nothing. For “Ulrich-in-the-replica”, these objects didn’t exist. There was no way to touch them.

“So, let’s hope that things don’t go badly!” he breathed. “Do you know how we’re supposed to move in here?”

“Touch the thumb and index finger on your right hand together, and move the hand in the direction you want to move in!” Yumi explained before rocketing off into the sky.

Ulrich tried to imitate her. He raised his hand...and fell violently to the ground!

“Ow! That hurt!” he yelled.

Yumi hovered around him elegantly.

“This is weird!” she said. “It’s not like on Lyoko. We’re not really here, our bodies are safe in the apartment?”

“Maybe, but in any case, my nose is all swollen!” Ulrich moaned. “Maybe there are devices in the helmet that make us feel pain, or something like that. We have to contact Jeremy.”

For a moment, the young boy regretted not calling their whiz kid friend before using the replica, but now it was too late to think about it... Finally, on the second try, he succeeded in taking flight without incident, and Yumi followed him above the city...

This “fictional” Oriental-looking place was in ruins. Several pathways were damaged and sharp fragments fell to Earth in a colourful gush. The walls of the pagodas had a number of cracks in them and the ground was dotted with holes, as if someone had bombed the place. The area seemed completely deserted.

The two friends flew over parks where strange glass shrubs had covered everything, engulfing kiosks and trails. Then, transparent bridges overhung the rivers, now dry. Finally, they reached a wall.

This wall was the only element that seemed new and fully intact. It was made up of black bricks and it seemed so tall as to touch the sky. Yumi and Ulrich flew high in the air along this gigantic structure, but even after about ten minutes, they still didn't see an end to it!

Ulrich stopped halfway to touch the surface of the structure with his fingers. In doing so, he received some small electric charges.

“Pfft...” he sighed. “This wall is endless!”

“An infinite wall? That's impossible!” Yumi exclaimed.

“In reality maybe, but here it isn't! The whole city seems to be protected by this barrier and we can't get over it!”

“There must at least be a door somewhere” the girl suggested.

They came back down to the ground and began to search for an opening. And indeed, a short while later, they found a two-metre tall door, kept shut by ample black door panels.

There was neither lock nor handle to be seen... Ulrich and Yumi tried to push it with all their might, but it was in vain. The door didn't budge even a millimetre.

In the end they gave up and leaned against the wall to catch their breath.

"It may be a virtual world," Ulrich breathed "but we get as breathless here as in the real world!"

"You're...right" Yumi stammered, suddenly interrupted by a blue laser beam, which struck her right in the chest.

She rolled to the side while Ulrich leapt up. He looked all around him, senses alert, until he saw it. It was a Manta Ray, one of X.A.N.A.'s monsters, which they'd already confronted during their adventures on Lyoko. The difference between the two fish was that this Manta Ray used its enormous wing-fin to fly, and it shot lasers from the end of its tail.

"This way!" Ulrich cried. "Hurry!"

The two friends flew at top speed, pursued by the monster. And new laser beams brushed against them in a burst of light...

"When it touched me," Yumi remarked "I didn't lose any life points!"

"Are you telling me that we're immortal?!" Ulrich wondered.

"I sure hope so!" his friend responded. "But without Jeremy and his supercomputer, we have no weapons or defence. And if we die..."

It was absurd, and in any case, nothing bad could happen to them. When they die on Lyoko, they immediately return to reality by reappearing in the scanners at the old factory. Why would this be any different? However, Ulrich also hit his nose when he fell and it hurt. Therefore, they didn't know exactly how the replica functioned. To tell the truth, they had no idea whatsoever...

Suddenly, Ulrich saw other Manta Rays rush at them from above through the clear city sky.

"Yumi, go down!" the young boy yelled, flying into a dive.

They landed on the smooth tiles of a building and allowed themselves to slide to the ground in a spiral. Then, they began to run harder.

Ulrich launched himself towards the gate of an abandoned park overgrown with tall, glass trees.

"If there are monsters, X.A.N.A. could also be here!" he cried.

"You didn't notice?" Yumi replied, gesturing with her head. "The Manta Rays don't have his symbol. They don't have the eye of X.A.N.A. like on Lyoko!"

"Probably, but they're still shooting at us!" Ulrich breathed.

The two friends got through the iron gate and flew between the shrubs at low altitude. They were tortuous and thorny, and a funny green-azure colour.

Suddenly, Yumi stopped short: Ulrich fell on top of her, and brought them both to the ground. Then, they jumped up.

“What happened?” Ulrich cried. “Did you see a ghost or what?”

Yumi didn’t respond, but signalled for him to look forward... The student held his breath: Professor Hopper was there, in front of them!

“No!” the girl murmured. “That can’t be him, not really. It’s surely a copy. A replica of Hopper...”

The professor’s face was framed by a beard and a thick pair of glasses. Aelita’s father seemed translucent and the friends could see right through him, like a ghost. He was wearing a lab coat and had his hands in his pockets. When he saw them, he smiled widely.

“Children, at last!” he exclaimed. “I’ve been waiting so long for children to come here... Come closer!”

Hopper gestured to them with his head, then disappeared behind a shrub. Ulrich and Yumi followed him, but when they got to the other side of the tree, the ghost had already disappeared.

Suddenly, a laser hit a branch above their head, sending down a rain of glass leaves that broke loudly upon contact with the ground. The two friends watched, then fled across the park.

The Manta Rays were now twenty in number, and encircled the city. And as soon as they saw the teens, they rushed towards them.

“What do we do?” Ulrich asked, worried.

“I’m afraid that...”

◆ THE REPLICA ◆

Yumi couldn't finish her sentence... The monsters had opened fire...

14

THE MEN IN BLACK



Ulrich landed on the ground, exhausted. He was nauseous, and all his muscles hurt as if he were beaten up. All around him, everything was dark and blurry.

“Ulrich!” cried Yumi.

“I sense you far away...”

“It’s because you have the helmet on!” his friend insisted. “We’re back on Earth. Take it off!”

Ulrich obeyed, and little by little, managed to sense his hands again and the helmet that sat heavily on his head. With some trouble, he removed the strap and finally took off the device. Yumi was sitting on the ground beside him in the apartment. She was having trouble breathing.

“Are you ok?” asked the schoolboy.

“Bad. It’s like the lasers hit me pretty hard,” she responded.

“Same for me.”

Ulrich stood up and started to stretch to loosen his muscles.

“What do we do?” he asked. “Do you think we should go back into this thing?”

“To hunt down Hopper’s ghost?” replied Yumi. “I doubt that’d be a good idea...”

“But then...” Ulrich started to say.

“Shh!” his friend suddenly interrupted him. “Listen!”

The young boy hushed up and focused on a strange noise. Coming from out the window, apart from the endless Sunday traffic, a rhythmic sound could be heard, like *pow, pow, pow...*

It was the propellers of a helicopter. Ulrich pointed to the window silently, but Yumi shook her head. The noise she heard was coming from the door. From the stairs... Steps...

Someone must have perceived the reactivation of the replica and came to take control of the building.

The two friends opened the door wide and snuck out into the dark hall. There, they heard a masculine voice say, “Boss, they’re over here!”

Men were climbing the staircase!

Ulrich got ready to slide down the railing to throw himself on the assailants, but Yumi signaled to him not to move. They huddled close to the railing so as not to be seen and

held their breaths. Two large men with short hair wearing sunglasses and long black overcoats were rapidly scaling the steps and passed in front of them.

The students dashed to the stairs. The first man nearly grabbed Yumi's arm and tried to catch her, in vain. He cried, "Stop you two! You don't know what kind of a mess..."

"Get on the ground! You are under arre *tht*!" added the second man with a lisp.

The two friends didn't listen to them and threw themselves onto the stairs. But only a simple slip up and they'd end up on the ground...and be taken.

"We are armed, guy *th*! Don't aggravate the *th*ituation!" yelled the man with the lisp.

The other hollered on his walkie-talkie, "This is Weasel and Ferret to Lone Wolf. They're coming! They are on the fourth floor!"

"There's a third man!" Ulrich murmured to Yumi.

They were on the first floor when they crossed paths with Lone Wolf. He was also dressed all in black and was holding an enormous pistol in his hand. He aimed it at them and spoke, "Well, kids, the race ends here!"

But Ulrich and Yumi didn't listen to him either and ran down the hall to dive behind the final door.

They were in an apartment identical to the one they just left, except that this one was empty. There was just carpet and some horrible wallpaper, plus some old, abandoned chairs in a corner.

Ulrich closed the door, blocking it off with a chair by placing it under the doorknob.

“What do you want to do now?” asked Yumi. “We’re completely trapped!”

Ulrich pointed to the window, “When we entered the building, I noticed that there was a ledge and gutters on the façade. We could maybe...”

“What? You’re crazy!” she protested. “We’re not in a movie!”

“Do you have a better idea?” he said irritated. “Because the door isn’t going to last for long!”

He hurried to the window and leaned it on the ledge.

“Come on!” he said to Yumi. “We’re going to make it!”

It indeed wasn’t like in the movies, where the ledges were always large enough to cross with ease! This one was barely ten centimetres wide, just enough for the tips of their toes... And the closest gutter was two metres away! The two friends kept an eye on the street and the trees and footpaths below, and saw a big, black sedan, doors open, parked crookedly just in front of the door to the building. A little further away, a young pizza man had parked his orange and green scooter, and was taking a pizza out from the luggage rack.

Suddenly, the door gave way and Lone Wolf rushed into the apartment.

Not the time to hesitate, Ulrich and Yumi ventured onto the ledge, with their bodies against the wall, faces pressed

against the rough rock surface, and toes contracted to get a better footing.

Ulrich leaned out as much as possible and managed to reach the metal gutter. He grabbed it desperately and stretched out his hand to help Yumi.

Unfortunately, in the meantime, Weasel and Ferret came out from the building and got back into their car... They watched them from below...

"Make *thure* you don't hurt your *thelvet*h, kid*th*!" the man with the lisp spoke. "You're done running away here!"

"You're dreaming!" muttered Ulrich.

Slowly, the two friends slipped across the length of the gutter, but when they made it two metres from the ground, the men in black approached them, laughing...

"Yumi, we have to jump!" whispered Ulrich.

"And then what? What do you think we do then?"

He looked nervously below, looking for an idea that he managed to find without taking too much time.

"The pizza man's scooter! We're going to take it!"

"Are you crazy?" exclaimed Yumi.

"We don't have a choice!" he responded. "On three, we jump! One...two...three!"

They launched themselves from the building and landed roughly on Weasel and Ferret.

"Ow!" the two men cried.

"Come on, Yumi!" cried Ulrich, rushing towards the scooter. "Quick, jump on behind me!"

He started up the engine and left like a rocket, while Lone Wolf dashed into the building. Without waiting, the man jumped into the sedan with his two partners...

Not only were Ulrich and Yumi not wearing helmets, but they had stolen a scooter! That's not to forget that they had broke open a door to an apartment and were now being chased down by a big car with three armed men on board!

"What a day!" snickered Ulrich while slipping between cars.

After Rue Lemonnier, they went through a roundabout which took them to Molière Avenue. But they leaned so much while turning that the kickstand of the scooter rubbed against the bitumen and produced a cloud of sparks.

"Try not to get us killed!" cried Yumi, hanging onto her friend.

"Look behind us and tell me if they're gaining on us!"

The sedan was indeed approaching closer and closer, especially whenever the scooter went down a long avenue without traffic.

"I get it!" exclaimed Ulrich. "We'll stay on the back roads!"

They turned onto the first small street on the right, then veered right away onto another on the left. In order to lose their assailants, the young boy went down a closed street and barely avoided an old van that beeped its horn at them to express its discontent...

“Here, they can no longer follow us!” Ulrich cried out in a triumphant tone.

“Actually, they can!” replied his friend. “Look up!”

Yumi pointed to the helicopter that, just like a big, black, buzzing fly hadn't lost sight of them once since they left Rue Lemonnier!

“I forgot they also had a helicopter!” sighed Ulrich. “Alright, let's go back to the park where we were this morning. We'll lose them there!”

He took another two turns again at full speed, then sped into long Diane Avenue that surrounded the park. But the black sedan suddenly emerged from around a corner, risking to overthrow the situation... The car headed straight towards them!

Ulrich drove onto the footpath and began beeping like crazy to warn the pedestrians to get out of the way!

“Over there, there's an entrance!” hollered Yumi, pointing towards an entryway in the park's metal gate...

“Watch out for that guy!” cried Yumi, panicking. “And the lady with the stroller!”

The helicopter was still above them and the sedan was catching up... The scene looked like one out of an action film...except that this situation was real.

“We need something to slow them down!” Ulrich stated aloud.

“Like what?” replied his friend. “We've only got pizzas on us!”

“Well, that’s fine!”

“What do you mean?”

Ulrich dodged a kid playing ball, giving him a smile so as not to scare him, then accelerated onto the gravel path.

“Throw them at them!”

Yumi moved to the seat of the scooter, managed to open the box full of pizzas, then released the first round of munitions.

“That one’s a Capricciosa pizza judging by the scent,” said Ulrich. “That makes me hungry!”

“You think this is the time for that?” responded his friend. “Ok, I’m ready!”

Ulrich slowed down to let the sedan approach. Ferret opened the passenger window, stuck his head out and clutched his gun. But when the car was only several metres away, Yumi threw the first pizza, which hit the man square in the face! His sunglasses slid while the mozzarella and tomato sauce dripped from his hair and clothes...

“Damn kids!” yelled the man.

“Bombs two and three, four cheeses and Margarita!” exclaimed Yumi, while throwing pizzas onto the windscreen. The sedan swerved and turned on its windscreen wipers, but too late! The driver didn’t see the empty bank on the right and the car headed straight into it, then became stuck. The shock made smoke come out from the radiator. The three men in black crawled out from the car one after the other...

“You have deadly aim!” sung Ulrich in admiration.

“Alright, now let’s get out of here,” responded Yumi with a smile.

Under the close surveillance of the black helicopter, Yumi and Ulrich left the scooter near the Albert metro station. They hid the keys under the seat and added fifty Euros there as well, which was all they had left. Ulrich would have just as well skipped over the reimbursement, but Yumi threw him a look and said, “Let’s at least do something good today!”

They rushed into the halls of the metro and caught their breath.

“We did it!” sighed Ulrich. “At least here the helicopter can’t follow us anymore, and the metro system is way too large. I challenge them to guess where we’re going!”

“Also,” Yumi added, “I noted the telephone number of the pizzeria of the scooter we took. As soon as we get to the train station, I’ll call them to tell them to go pick it up...”

Ulrich agreed and observed his friend: she had rosy cheeks, hair all messed up from the wind, and a tired smile, but in his eyes, she had never been so beautiful before! It was his way to tell “we are more than just friends.” Wasn’t this the best time, now, to make it clear where they stand?

“Yumi,” he stammered “I don’t know if you remember... It was several days ago at Kadic. When I wanted to talk to you and we were interrupted by Sissi...”

“I remember very well,” she replied, placing a finger gently on his mouth. “But we should get going! We can talk

about it another time, don't you think? We have all the time in the world ahead of us!"

She approached him and gave him a small kiss on the cheek. Her mouth was soft and her beautiful perfume floated in the air...all that was needed to make his head spin... It was true, they had all the time in the world...

He took her by the hand, and together they passed through the metro. They needed to return to Kadic as quickly as possible to tell Jeremy and the others what they had discovered!

It was eight hours in the morning at Washington, but a lot of activity still continued to go on in the bureau. For those working in certain domains, there really was no weekend off! Like every day, Dido showed up at seven on the dot. She drank some coffee while leafing through the news and seeing what happened the night before. It was amazing how the journalists managed to write everything without ever succeeding in making the reader understand what really happened. The woman turned on her computer and started to study several reports when the phone rang.

"A call from Belgium," announced Maggie, her secretary.
"Send it through to me!"

With these words, Dido grew an ugly grin. It was an unexpected call, and for her, unexpected calls were never good news... There was a click while Maggie transferred the line. Then...

"This is Lone Wolf," said a masculine voice. "Dido?"

"Yes, it's me."

The man was calling her on a public line. She could hear children crying and people angry in the background. Someone said, "It is clear that this small thipity thau thage is of the best quality!"

Then a woman cried, "You're nothing but delinquents and thugs! I'm going to call the police!"

Dido began to grow impatient and tapped her jewellery-covered fingers on the desk.

"Lone Wolf," she said, "I hope that you realise that this call is in violation of all the security norms."

"Certainly, Dido... Madam. But this is an emergency! The kids found the apartment on Rue Lemonnier. That's the bad news...that could ruin the entire day!"

"Did they find the replica?" asked the woman.

"Yes, madam, and they even activated it. We showed up ten minutes after the signal was triggered. We unfortunately weren't prepared for a red alert here in Brussels."

"Bunch of useless..." Dido exclaimed, outside of her normal self. "I even organised for you to have a team ready! And you were supposed to be!"

"Well," replied Lone Wolf stupidly "but maybe they weren't able to enter the replica either. Like what happened to us!"

"They're kids!" the woman hollered into the phone. "We don't know what would happen were people of that age to try

it. Give me a detailed account of what happened immediately!”

“Well,” Lone Wolf continued, “We received the alert and we rushed to the scene. Agent Weasel, Ferret, and me... And Agents Marten and Fox were also on board a helicopter. But the kids managed to get away from us. They were armed, madam...”

“Armed?” Dido asked surprised.

“Well, *ye th*,” exhaled a voice behind Lone Wolf. “Explain to her how the *pizzath* were *exthellent* weapon *th*!”

“That’s enough!” roared the woman. “I don’t want to hear anything more of it! Where are the kids?”

“The helicopter wasn’t able to follow them once they reached the metro,” Lone Wolf continued. “But this isn’t a problem. They are surely headed towards the train station to return home. We can follow them up to Kadic and then intercept them!”

Dido sighed. She couldn’t stand working with idiots.

“Forget it,” she ordered, mortified. “You’ve done enough damage for today... Just avoid having the people around you call the police. That’s all we need, for our government to excuse itself to the local forces. And then, return to the apartment on Rue Lemonnier. I want three men to watch it day and night until the next order! And forget the kids! I will contact our agent at Kadic. They will resolve the situation...”

“The agent at Kadic?” said Lone Wolf surprised. “But madam, he has no longer been in service since...”

“An agent may never retire and never goes out of service, Lone Wolf. When you work with us, you don’t leave so easily... Remember that, you!”

Dido hung up the telephone with a slam.

She smiled, then returned to the receiver.

“Maggie!” she said, more calm.

“Yes?” the secretary responded.

“Find me the phone number of the agent for the city of the Iron Tower, in France. We have an emergency...”

15

EVA SKINNER'S KISS



Jeremy had insisted: with the man with two dogs wandering around the Hermitage and their parents' homes, they were best to remain hidden for as long as possible. And the best way to be discreet was to stay out in the open! So, instead of the Hermitage or a bedroom at Kadic, everyone was told to meet at around five o'clock at the *Café au Lait*. Therefore everyone, Jeremy, Aelita, Richard, Ulrich and Yumi – just returned from their trip to Brussels – were present...everyone except Odd and Eva.

"Has anyone seen them?" Ulrich asked.

Jeremy shrugged: "They saw each other this morning, but I don't know anything other than that. You know Odd, he must be in the middle of making goo-goo eyes at her..."

“Did you try to call him?”

“Yes, but he didn’t respond.”

Aelita shook her head, incredulous. Ulrich and Yumi let out their exasperation, which they had been holding in until now:

“But aren’t you interested to know what happened? We found a replica!”

“And in it we saw the ghost of...” one said.

“And the men in black...” the other added.

“And the pizza...”

“Calm down, calm down!” Jeremy cut them off. “That’s the reason why we’re here, to listen to you; but say everything in the right order! Did you manage to construct the electronic lock pick?”

Both speaking at the same time, the two students recounted what happened in Belgium, up until the incredible car chase through the streets of Brussels. Jeremy brought them up-to-date with what happened during their absence: the mysterious man at Yumi’s house and everything else.

At the end of the story, the girl held her face in her hands, while Richard looked at his palm-computer, seemingly embarrassed. Jeremy paced, hands behind his back.

“We’re there!” he finally murmured. “We’re on the verge of discovering something huge on Hopper and the supercomputer.”

“What do you mean by that?” Ulrich asked.

"If you both seemed to see Hopper in the replica you found..."

"Not 'seemed'" Ulrich protested. "He was really there."

"...so, that means that the replica was constructed by Hopper himself. And that the professor inserted a copy of himself in it to give us clues."

"You mean give clues to the men in black!" Yumi corrected. "Who knows how many times they've been able to easily observe this mysterious city, and speak with him?"

"Yes" Jeremy continued. "And I'd like to know what Miss Hertz has to do with all of this! But I think that all the mysteries are starting to have a link to one another: firstly, there were the codes in Richard's palm-computer, then the codes in Hertz's dossier, and finally this replica. It's as if Hopper left a series of traces that we have to follow..."

"Maybe they're clues for finding my mother..." Aelita breathed.

"Maybe!" Jeremy said. "It's highly likely that Hopper wanted us to solve this enigma that's close to his heart, in other words Anthea's disappearance. But the problem is that the file with the code has disappeared, and I don't know who took it or why."

"What if it was Professor Hertz who took it?" Richard asked.

"She never goes into students' rooms!" Jeremy announced. "No, it was someone else."

Ulrich intervened: “You’re forgetting one detail, because in the chase for the man, we’re not alone! We have to confront two enemies that we barely even know. On one side, there are the men in black, who are armed and have a helicopter and cars, and maybe even more... And on the other, there’s the man with two dogs, who’s wandering around the city and who wants to kidnap our parents.”

“Could this man be part of the men in black?” Yumi suggested.

“Impossible!” Jeremy replied. “They work differently. The man with two dogs acts alone, he uses technology straight out of science fiction, and he doesn’t care about laws or any of that sort of stuff. The men in black on the other hand seem like government agents or something of the sort. Do you have any idea of the number of authorisations required to fly a helicopter above a city? The police know them and leave them alone, that’s for sure! So, Ulrich is right; as well as us, there are two other groups investigating the Franz Hopper case.”

Then Jeremy sat back down, exhausted.

“Guys,” he sighed “we need to move forward by reflecting on each step, or we won’t get anywhere. The problem is very, very delicate, and if you ask me, first of all you need to go find Odd. Yesterday, he told me that he wanted to see Eva, but didn’t elaborate. Before deciding what we’re going to do, let’s try to assemble as many elements as possible in this puzzle, and above all, stick together.”

“You said ‘you need’ and not ‘we need’ to go find Odd” Richard asked Jeremy. “You aren’t coming?”

“No, if it doesn’t bother you, I’d like to borrow your palm-computer. That way, I can start to study the code. In my room, I have a series of notes on this whole thing and I can reflect on it alone, and in silence. So, you go find Odd, and we’ll all meet up tomorrow after school. What do you say?”

“Proposition accepted, boss!” Ulrich nodded. “Well, let’s go find that slacker Odd!”

Jeremy watched his friends leave the café, then he paid for the food and exited into the January cold. In reality, he had no intention of shutting himself in his room...at least, not right away!

He walked aimlessly around the city streets, and then he found himself in front of the Hermitage. There, he understood what the place he really wanted to go to was.

He passed the villa gate, then went through a hole in the fence at the bottom of the garden to arrive directly in Kadic’s park. The morning’s torrential rain had melted the snow, making the undergrowth muddy.

He headed towards the manhole hidden in the ground. He slid the cover to the side, then began to descend into the sewers.

He walked the same path he’d taken many times before, and then climbed back up to the iron bridge to the old abandoned factory. He took the elevator to reach the three under-

ground levels, right down to the supercomputer room, at the heart of the factory.

The atmosphere was sombre and quiet. Near the door, on the ground, there was a manhole through which he had gone and discovered this secret and mysterious place. He again remembered the enigma that he had to solve to open the cover: *delenda* was the question, and the response had been *Carthago*. The wordplay came from a Latin phrase meaning “Carthage must be destroyed.” And it was a long time after, during the video found in the secret room in the Hermitage, that Hopper had explained what his “Carthage” really was, the monster it contained and why it had to be destroyed.

Jeremy approached the enormous and unique cylinder that sat in the room. This metallic column reached the ceiling. It was cold and perfectly smooth, apart from its lever switch that came out of the base.

If he'd pulled the lever, the room would have been immediately bathed in light, and on the cylinder, the thousand coloured lights of circuits would glisten as they began to work again. The old factory would come back to life, the scanners on the second underground floor would reactivate and the command terminal would light up once again...

The return of Lyoko...and only Lyoko? Or also X.A.N.A., the creature they were convinced they'd annihilated for good?

Mechanically, Jeremy posed his hand on the lever. His fingers then wrapped around it to lower the switch and once again activate the supercomputer.

Suddenly, he stepped back, startled. Was there someone there with him? His breathing became more rapid. No, he was probably just scared of himself... Jeremy was alone in the factory; nobody could have followed him...

"X.A.N.A.?" he whispered.

No response.

Odd was bound and gagged in the living room of the girl he had thought would be his future girlfriend.

Eva had had succeeded in rendering him defenceless with impressive agility. Before he could say a word, he found himself on the ground, his ankles and wrists bound by a thick rope that rubbed against his skin! And the poor boy had to avoid arching his back, or the rope would cut into his body. As for the gag, it was so tight that he was having trouble breathing. But where had the girl learned of such knots?

No, she wasn't a girl, he had to keep reminding himself. Eva was...the enemy. Eva was X.A.N.A.

She was seated on the floor beside Odd, with her laptop on her knees. She was analysing a series of images and files: the video of Aelita's mother, some photos of Professor Hertz and scientific articles. From time to time, to distract herself a little, she would open a series of images that seemed to come from a video game. In them was a sci-fi-like city that

seemed somewhat Oriental: there were azure roofs in the form of pagodas and transparent, coloured pathways intertwined around towers. Eva looked and sighed, but when Odd tried to ask her a question about the gag, she ignored him completely...

Suddenly, the doorbell rang. Eva put the computer down and got up.

"You," she said to Odd "don't make a sound! If not, I'll be forced to hurt the person that has just disturbed us. And I'm sure that will displease you..."

When she responded to the intercom, her voice immediately changed: it was now that of a mature man.

"Yes?"

"Um, hello!" the intercom crackled. "I'm Ulrich, a classmate of Eva's. I'm here with other friends. Is Eva there, please?"

When he heard his friend's voice, Odd twitched. He had to slide across the floor, reach the door and warn them!

Eva responded in the man's voice: "No, I'm sorry... My daughter went out with a friend. A boy named Odd."

"Ah, ok, but it's just, well..."

"Excuse me, children" the masculine voice continued. "I'm very busy."

She hung up and turned to Odd, smiling. She started using her normal voice again.

"You see? Nobody was hurt. You were perfect!"

Eva went to the window to see if the others were leaving the house, then she approached Odd. Her self-assurance was terrifying. She skilfully removed the gag that was preventing the boy from speaking.

“Argh, ouff...my friends...”

“You’re not happy?” she sneered. “I let them go without hurting them. I have the impression that you wanted to tell me something... What?”

“Can I...have...water?” Odd asked. “This thing was choking me.”

Eva laughed heartily, and in her laugh, the girl's voice mingled with a deeper and more twisted one belonging to the being within her.

“Water?” she said. “You just have to go find it, my boy! Wasn't it you and your friends who said that X.A.N.A. was defeated?”

It was a nightmare. Odd knew X.A.N.A. He had fought him many times and he had seen someone possessed by the artificial intelligence that lived in Lyoko. But this was different. Eva seemed like a normal girl, in both voice and expressions. And then, when William Dunbar was possessed by X.A.N.A., the Eye, his sign, occasionally appeared in his pupils. Eva had no sign. Not to mention, the monster no longer lived in Lyoko. Lyoko was currently deactivated. Had he evolved? And how was it possible that each of them didn't notice anything?!

“What are you going to do?” Odd asked.

“Good question! Destroy you, of course!” X.A.N.A.’s voice responded coldly. “And then, destroy every being that gets in my way...”

“But...why?”

Eva didn’t seem to be herself anymore. Her voice was metallic and her face expressionless.

“Because you, you humans, you’re wrong, and now, you’re going to pay for your mistakes. You think you’re superior, the kings of the world, but you’ll soon discover that that’s not the case. I’ve already prepared an infallible plan!”

Eva returned to her laptop and pressed several keys until a photo appeared. It was that of a man whose face was half-hidden by a hat. And his open mouth highlighted horrible canine teeth made of gold.

“I’ll use of this man, who you probably don’t even know yet!” X.A.N.A. said. “Then I’ll use this girl, Eva...”

Then, the creature looked at Odd, who, for the first time, felt completely horrified.

“And then I’ll use you, Odd Della Robbia. You’ll be of precious use to me!”

Before the student could do anything to stop her, Eva leaned forward and took his face between her hands. Her fingers were icy, like death. Then, the girl’s face approached Odd’s, closing the gap between them little by little, lips parted...

“Please...” he whispered.

They kissed...

An intense smoke then exited Eva's lips and entered Odd's. Then, everything became obscure for him... And everything changed...

Eva stood and quickly united the ropes restraining the boy.

"I'm...ready" Odd announced in a bizarre and trembling voice.

Then, he started laughing in the same metallic voice as X.A.N.A.'s: "Controlling this boy was much easier than the girl, because he has a rudimentary mind! Wow, great! I already feel more at ease in this boy's skin."

"So, it's time to go!" Eva said with a wink. "The other snotty brats must surely be wondering where we've gone."

Half past midday, at the Washington office.

Dido had remained alone. That was exactly what she wanted. She had proposed to her secretary to take a few hours off for lunch with friends.

This building was part of an office complex, but behind its greyish façade hid the best security technology on the market. However, Dido was convinced that the old methods were a lot more secure: she also continued to distrust her secretary, as although she trusted her a little, she could always listen in on and record her phone calls...

Dido nervously lit a cigarette. She had so hoped that the Hopper affair would be closed for a long time, and archived in a file with the label *Authorised Personnel Only*. It was a

failure, certainly, but one that dated back more than ten years. In the meantime, her life had advanced, as had her career. She no longer thought about the professor and his sophisticated computers. On the other hand, today, this old story bounced back with the force of an atomic bomb...

Dido always had three keys in her office. She kept them in three different spots in the room to open the secret drawer in her desk. From it, she took out an old diary filled with code. She turned the computer on and entered its repertoire. Then, she typed a series of passwords composed of numbers and letters. As soon as she did this, the computer displayed the telephone number she needed. Finally, before dialling it, Dido activated all the anti-intercept protections she had.

The speaker responded on the third ring. Their voice seemed deformed by some device, but it mattered little as Dido's voice was also as distorted...

"Madame...it's been a long time! The line is secure, I imagine?"

"Of course, Hannibal."

Dido closed her eyes. As she did so, the image of the man she was talking to returned to her. He had the shifty eyes of a lizard, a large mouth and gold canine teeth. His hands were swollen and covered with rings. Hannibal had always had a taste for jewellery and flashy things. Dido remembered, even though they had only met but three times. But that was more than enough, because this man made her nauseous...

“To what do I owe this call?” the man said. “And this honour?”

“The network in France is operational again” responded Dido. “And we’ve just discovered that one of your men is there. Judging by his *modus operandi*, I suppose that it's Grigory Nictapolus.

“I think this information is...accurate” sneered the man with golden teeth.

“You haven’t changed” she replied in a dry tone. “When there’s a dirty job to do, you always send that man and his horrible dogs.”

“So?”

“So, I want to know why he’s in Kadic’s city. What is hidden there, Hannibal? What exactly do you have in mind?”

The man paused, then continued: “What you told us, six years ago, did not please us, Dido. The factory and Lyoko were ours, and their construction was commissioned by the Green Phoenix! And you pushed Walter to stop everything. But the moment came to count our losses: a new game has started and the cards are in our hands. And they’re very good cards, too...”

“You’re talking about Anthea Schaeffer, I suppose?” Dido asked. “We know that she’s in your hands.”

“Hey now! You’d better not be hoping that I’m going to tell you about that!” Hannibal sneered. “It’s a little early in the stages of negotiation!”

The woman was silent. Hannibal was an old fox... She knew that it was useless to try and make him fall into such a simple trap. He was called the “Magician” for a reason! This cultureless man, the son of very poor farmers, had actually managed to become head of one of the oldest mafia organisations. Dido could not underestimate her adversary, a true rattlesnake...

“What do you want?” she finally asked.

“The Green Phoenix wants to participate in the operation, and make a profit out of it” the Magician replied. “So, here is my proposition: we let you bury this story once and for all... and in exchange, you allow us to look at the plans of the old abandoned computer in the factory.”

In your dreams, Dido was about to respond, but she didn't have time...

Hannibal had already hung up...

16

THE HERMITAGE'S LAST SECRET



Aelita woke up at three in the morning with a jolt. Had she been sleepwalking again? Yes, apparently, because she didn't know where she was... But this time, the dream had been really terrible: on Lyoko, then in a science-fiction city where the man with two dogs and the ghost of her father were wandering around. She was in her pyjamas, covered in sweat, and shaking in fear... What had happened?

She stood up, blinked, looked around to get her bearings, and found herself behind a television set. The room was almost empty. There was just a small sofa and a small door.

And it was so low that one would need to crawl on all fours to get through.

This was the secret room of the Hermitage that she and her friends had found together thanks to the plan that her father had nicely drawn in ink in a notebook. If the young girl had come there, it could only mean that she had, in her sleep, crossed through the entire passage leading from Kadic to the cellar of the villa.

A bit lost, she looked at the white wall in front of her. It had scratch marks all over as if an animal had desperately tried to get through. Immediately, Aelita looked down at her hands: her nails were full of plaster and the ends of her fingers were worn down to the point of being covered in blood. So, it had been she, during her sleep, who had lacerated the wall... But why?

She placed her ear against the wall and tapped it several times... Judging by the sound, the wall sounded hollow on the other side. She needed to break through it immediately to discover what lay on the other side!

Aelita began searching for a tool, anything she could use, to break through this wall. She entered the storeroom where she and Jeremy had earlier found sacks of cement with the address of the Broulet company. This was the first hint that drove them to discover the secret room. The storeroom was narrow and full of bricks, dusty sacks and other mason tools. But, lying at an angle, there was an old, slightly rusted pick-axe...that would be perfect for the job!

She dragged the pickaxe into the secret room, then pushed the television set far from the wall to make room. She sweated and panted from all the effort: the pickaxe was very heavy! However, Aelita wasn't worried by the fatigue now that she was persuaded that the Hermitage was hiding another secret, and her dream had shown her the way to uncover it!

She lifted the tool and struck it against the wall, but the wooden handle slipped through her hands and merely chipped away at the primer. She had to keep trying. She moved her hands further apart on the length of the handle, caught her breath, then hurled the pickaxe with all her might against the wall. It gave way in one hit, leaving the young girl coughing by the dust and debris!

This wall had been built with the intent to be easily demolished. Her father had wished for her to discover this new secret room, constructed behind the first...

The words of Philippe Broulet, the mason who had worked for her father, came back to her: "It must have been about ten years ago, but I remember it well. Hopper asked a personal favour of me: I had to return to the Hermitage and wall up a section of the house, so as to create a hidden room invisible from the outside."

"A section of the house" is what he had said, not just a room! The answer had been right in front of their eyes since the start and they hadn't seen it!

Aelita had broken a hole into the wall about thirty centimetres wide. She rubbed her eyes which, were red from all the dust, and looked through the hole. Her mouth opened wide... She took hold of the pickaxe to enlarge the hole and pass through to the other side.

Her phone! She needed to call Jeremy right away! But she didn't have her phone on her since she had arrived there by sleepwalking, dressed only in her pyjamas. She made a quick u-turn...

That night, Jeremy went to sleep as soon as he had laid his head on his pillow, exhausted by all the emotions of the past few days. However, he jumped awake when he heard knocking on his bedroom door.

"Who is it?"

"It's me, Aelita! Can I come in?"

He hurried to open the door for his friend. He thought he had seen a ghost at first when he saw her swollen eyes and dishevelled hair. She was also dressed in a funny pair of jeans made up of different-coloured fabric and a sweatshirt.

"Aelita" stammered Jeremy. "But... What time is it? What are you doing here?"

"Come on! We have to hurry!"

"But what...?"

"Come on, quick!" she insisted. "Put on some pants! It's very important!"

Jeremy obeyed, then together they crossed through the deserted dormitory halls. They left through the park at Kadic and weaved silently through the trees, then passed through the hole in the fence to finally arrive at the Hermitage...

The young girl didn't utter a word until they reached the basement. Once there, she motioned towards the secret room and murmured, "Get ready for a great surprise, Jeremy!"

Together, they activated the mechanism to open the way into the secret room. The boy entered first and saw the hole in the wall... And he as well was shocked to silence...

Aelita had found a new room, bigger than the first, and illuminated by a large neon light. The centre of the room contained a scanner, similar to the ones at the abandoned factory, but that appeared older. On a sign on the sliding door, an inscription was flashing: *Caution: Danger! Unsafe for those over 18 years of age.* There was also a large supercomputer beside the wall hooked up to the scanner. Jeremy caught a glimpse of a control terminal too. It was a version much more primitive than the command console underground at the factory.

"But...Aelita" he exhaled, once he recovered from the shock. "You found...Lyoko!"

"Well, one of its replicas. Like the one that Yumi and Ulrich saw in Brussels, or quite close to it. Ok, I'm going to take the scanner right away to go visit this world!"

“You can’t do that all alone!” immediately replied Jeremy while adjusting his glasses. “We need to call Yumi, Ulrich and Odd. It could be dangerous! We need to...”

Aelita approached her friend and placed her hands on his shoulder. She was so close to him that he could smell her sweet perfume...

“I called you, because I need you at the controls” she explained. “It’s my duty to enter the replica. My father guided me here in a series of dreams, and I know that he would want it to be me who is virtualised on this replica... So, do you want to help me?”

Jeremy blushed, then took Aelita into his arms...

“Uh... Alright, leave it to me!”

In a beam of light, the body of the young girl lifted into the air to be transformed, then returned to touch the ground. Aelita had again taken her elf-like appearance, and the landscape surrounding her resembled the forest sector of Lyoko... But it wasn’t exactly the same. The sky was like a plain, azure colour, without any differing shades, and the ground was a simple extended green. For a moment, she was hit by a wave of vertigo from the virtualisation.

In front of her, there were three trees. They were large oak trees with brown trunks and large leaves that reflected a game of shadows and light on the ground. Apart from them, there wasn’t anything else, just a flat, green and blue surface that extended as far as the eye could see.

"Is everything alright?" asked Jeremy from his post at the controls.

Aelita heard the voice of her friend directly in her ear.

"Yes!" she replied. "I'm a bit scared, but alright."

"I wonder what the inscription means on the scanner: *Danger for those over 18 years of age...*" added Jeremy pensively.

"Well, I'm a minor, so everything should be fine!" responded Aelita. "Also, I don't think there are any monsters around here! There isn't even a city... Just three trees!"

She took several steps in their direction, then ran up to them. She approached the first tree, then Jeremy announced, "A message just appeared on my screen."

"It says that this tree is number one. There is a date, 1985, and an inscription: *End of Project Carthage.*"

The young girl lightly touched the trunk of the big tree, and right away, a long and narrow hole opened up, revealing an empty space. She observed it for a moment, then entered.

"How about now?" she asked her friend.

"I have no clue!" he responded.

Aelita found herself in a huge deserted laboratory without any windows. It was cluttered with metal tables, machines, big microscopes and computers, but no chairs. And a series of neon lights illuminated the room.

"Ah, it's you!?" a voice spoke.

Aelita turned towards it abruptly.

Her father. She saw her father, Franz Hopper, leaning over a microscope and dressed in a white lab coat... And beside him, she saw a beautiful woman with red hair also in a lab coat!

“Daddy, Mummy!” she cried out, running to hug them. But she passed through her parents as if they were ghosts and fell with a thump against the microscope table. She quickly stood up, called to them again, and tried again to hug them. Sadly, she wasn’t even able to touch them.

“Calm down, Aelita!” Jeremy gently spoke. “My screen is covered with notes. What you are currently seeing is a simulation, or rather, a three dimensional recording of something that happened long ago... I’d say...in 1985. Your parents aren’t real. You can’t touch them, and they can’t hear you...”

Aelita threw her fist against the table and cried out in anger, “It’s not fair!”

“I know” he sighed. “But if your father wanted to show you something, you should pay attention and listen, don’t you think?”

At the same time, the professor raised his nose from his microscope and turned towards his wife. Then, he gave a slight smile from under his beard and said, “Anthea, I’m tired...”

“I know, dear... How far along are you?”

“It won’t be much longer: two months, maybe three, and then finally, Project Carthage will be functioning. We did it... It will be a great day for the entire world...”

After these words, a faint sadness swept across Anthea's eyes.

"My love!" said Hopper, concerned. "What's wrong?"

"I found the documents that we were looking for... It wasn't easy."

"So?" insisted the professor.

"Unfortunately, our doubts were well-founded. Carthage will not save the world, but the opposite. It could even help destroy it...because inside the First City, they inserted a dark zone that we cannot control and that will transform Carthage into a weapon of mass destruction."

Hopper closed his fists. Immediately, the laboratory, he and his wife, and the whole virtual world dissolved around Aelita as if someone had melted it with acid.

The young girl found herself now in a small and very welcoming living room. There was a couch, a red floral rug, and large bookshelves on all the walls. Her father was sitting on the couch with his head between his hands, and his wife was holding him tenderly. A little girl of three years of age was playing on the ground. She was wearing a silly, little, pink dress and had bright, red hair, all cut short. She had with her a doll in the form of an elf.

"Mister Pück!" cried Aelita, while looking at the doll.

"Yes, it's your favourite toy!" announced Jeremy from the computer. "So, this little girl must be you, like you were in the past. You were cute!"

In the living room, Anthea was murmuring something into Professor Hopper's ear...

"No!" he shouted, raising his head. "We sacrificed our whole lives for this project! Our daughter was born in a military base, and we haven't been able to see anyone for months... And all that for what? To create a new weapon? I won't allow it!"

"Speak more quietly, dear!" responded Anthea. "The room may be under surveillance. From now on, we can no longer be sure of anything."

"I couldn't care less!" rumbled Aelita's father. "So what if they hear?! I built Carthage to bring the world to a better place and not to drive it to its ruin! The electronic communications control should serve to provide low-cost services to everyone, including those in the third world or in great difficulty. But these maniacs only want to take advantage of it as a weapon for control in their stupid war! Personally, I don't care if a person is Russian or American! They are still human beings! All equal."

"I agree with you" Anthea responded, hugging him. "But what can we do? They are now capable of ending the project, even without our help... And don't forget Aelita. If we expose too much, who will take care of her?"

The couple remained quiet for a good while, observing the little girl playing on the carpet, laughing and hugging her toy.

Hopper then murmured, "We can escape. I don't know how yet, but we'll do it! If we created Carthage even though

everyone thought it was crazy, then we can do plenty of other things. We will destroy what we built. They'll be left with nothing, and we'll escape with our dear Aelita. But we'll bring the fruits of all our years of sacrifice and labour with us, and we will find a way to continue to study somewhere else to give birth to a new Carthage!"

On the rug, the little girl smiled to her parents and babbled, "Leeo...co!"

Hopper reached out a hand to caress her face and said, "Lyoko? Yes, my dear! If we build a new Carthage, we could call it Lyoko... It's a wonderful name!"

Suddenly, Aelita found herself back on the vast plains in front of the tree.

"It's over?" she asked Jeremy.

"Almost! I just have to finish saving it. By the way, aren't there still the other trees? According to my computer, the next tree covers the period of time from 1985 to 1988 and is called "*A Life Incognito*"."

The young girl took the several steps that separated her from the second oak tree. Then, she reached out her hand and once again, the trunk opened up to let her pass through.

This time, she found herself in the courtyard of a military base. It was very cold. The blockhouses of cement were covered by snow and large searchlights swept the courtyard, illuminating in fits and starts the surrounding walls and the rolls of barbed wire. Men were restless in every sense, hold-

ing big dogs on leashes. Helicopters lifted up into the sky, and sirens were blaring, provoking a lot of movement below.

Aelita noticed a couple crossing the courtyard and rushing towards a Jeep. They were a slender woman and a stocky man, both wrapped in large, hooded military coats to protect themselves from the cold. Were these her parents? She decided not to take the risk of letting them out of her sight and dived onto the seat in the back of the Jeep.

A moment later, the woman took to the steering wheel and removed her hood. The man sat in the passenger seat and remained hooded.

Aelita placed her hand in front of her mouth to stifle a surprised gasp: this person wasn't her mother, but a young woman with thick, black, curly hair and a dainty nose. She knew this face. It seemed to her as if she had seen it before somewhere else, but where? She couldn't remember...

"Professor Schaeffer!" said the woman while starting the car. "Stay calm and let me handle this. They won't stop us, you'll see!"

The man nodded. He finally opened in large coat, and a smiling, small, red head of hair came out of it. Hopper hugged the girl and immediately sheltered her from sight.

"Be sweet, Aelita!" he said softly. "No one must know that you're here, so don't make any noise. Be on your best behaviour, and in a bit, you'll be able to go to bed, promise!"

"You were already a little brat!" laughed Jeremy in Aelita's ear.

The young girl didn't reply. She was too busy watching the scene unfold around her... She wanted to hear everything!

The Jeep started up and crossed the courtyard to meet up at a checkpoint where a metallic sentry box was protecting a double barrier. This was the exit.

Two soldiers left the look-out post, all wrapped up warmly and with their guns over their shoulders. One of the two pointed his gun towards the Jeep, while the other headed towards the window and greeted the woman who was driving, "Good evening, Major Steinback!"

"At ease, soldier!" she responded. "And open the barrier, I'm in a hurry!"

"Sorry Major, but the barrier won't be opening tonight. There was a violation of the security code and the Colonel..."

"The Colonel personally ordered me to leave the base on a mission of absolute priority!" replied the driver, frenetically. "You see this man beside me? He isn't hiding his face for nothing! I have an ID that gives me full power here, and I can guarantee you that if this barrier doesn't open in the next ten seconds, starting tomorrow and for the rest of your life, you'll be doing nothing other than cleaning the toilets from morning 'til night!"

The soldier remained still for a second, then finished by saying, "Yes, Major... I'll open the barrier right away!"

In the Jeep, the professor smiled, "Permission from the Colonel?"

“I have my connections, Professor, don’t worry!” she murmured.

The Jeep passed the barrier and raced off into the night on an icy road. The base was located at the top of a small hill bordered by birch trees covered with snow that went on past the horizon.

Hopper began to speak again, “How could I not worry? Aelita and I are saved, but Anthea...”

“We will find her, Professor!” responded the woman. “You have my word. I have my contacts, and they are already on the job. Soon, we will know just who took her and why, and we will be able to escape with her also! For the time being, the most important thing is that you have made it out with the documents. I was called the relentless, remember? I don’t have the right to make a mistake...”

Aelita fell from the back seat and found herself directly on an embankment. The change of scenery was so jarring that it made her head spin. Now, she was under the sun in the yard of a simple cottage surrounded by other similar houses. Far away up in the mountains in the snowy peaks.

Her father wore a suit and tie and had a leather briefcase. He climbed up to the house and opened the door with a small key. A car then pulled over in the yard, and a driver stepped out. It was the woman who had helped the professor escape before. She was in a military outfit and wore her ranks on her shoulder.

“Allow me, Major!” said Hopper, opening the door to the house. “After you!”

“Thank you! We can talk in peace.”

Aelita followed the two adults inside. The few pieces of furniture they had were old and out of fashion. It seemed like a home without a soul that was only being rented for a brief amount of time.

Hopper showed the Major to a seat, then went to prepare some coffee.

“How is the little one doing?” asked the woman.

“Very well. Aelita has a great babysitter, but I plan to enrol her in nursery school soon. She is old enough now, and she needs to be around other kids.”

“I’m sorry, Professor,” spoke Major Steinback “but you’ll need to move again in less than a month...”

“That’s a shame,” sighed Aelita’s father “I was getting used to being employee Henri Zopfi...”

“We’ll give you a new identity and another place of work!”

“Again...”

The Major took the cup of coffee that Hopper handed to her. She drank some of it and spoke, “You know why I am here... I have news for you.”

“You found Anthea?” asked Hopper, his eyes suddenly glimmering.

“Not yet, unfortunately. But we finished our research and we know who is responsible for taking her: a soldier who left at the time of your wife’s disappearance.”

“I want to see his file!” cried the professor straight away.

“I figured as much, so I brought it for you” she continued. “But I recommend you don’t do anything stupid and let me work on the investigation. The man is named Mark James Hollenback. He is twenty-one years old. He entered the army at sixteen years old, and he worked at the base of the project for a year. We don’t know why he decided to do such a stupid thing yet, but we’re on his trail.”

Aelita etched this name into her mind: Hollenback. Mark Hollenback. The man who took her mother...

Then, the scene changed again.

The young girl found herself underneath the porch of the Hermitage on a cold winter morning. Or at least, it must have been cold, judging by the colour of the sky and the movement of the trees shaken by the wind, but she couldn’t feel anything. On the door of the house, someone had just attached a panel: *Sold*. A small van arrived, lurching when braking, and pulled up in front of the Hermitage. Child Aelita climbed out. She was now six years of age and already better resembled the young girl who was watching her double from under the front porch.

“Are we here, Daddy?” asked the little girl.

“Yes!” responded her father, now descending himself from the van.

From sitting in the driver's seat, Major Steinback got out, this time in civilian clothes. She was wearing a red shirt and a pair of jeans.

“And here is your new home!” she announced to the professor in a cheerful tone of voice. “If all goes well, you can sign Aelita up for school and settle in a bit!”

Under the porch, the young, elf girl smiled to see these two be less formal with each other... How many years had passed since their escape from the military base? At least two or three. Her father and the Major started to unload the boxes from the van into the house while the little Aelita played in the yard.

“So, who will I be starting from today?” asked the professor.

“Your new identity will make you quite happy!” answered the woman. “You are Franz Hopper, science teacher at Kadic Academy, which is close by here. I will also be working at the school, under a fake name. That way, I'll be able to watch over you.”

They laughed. Then, Waldo Schaeffer officially became Franz Hopper, and added with a grave tone, “What interests me is to be able to get back to my research as quickly as possible. And especially to find Anthea.”

“I've already made contact with a local manufacturer” the woman assured him. “He possesses a factory not far from here. We can reconstruct the underground level and trans-

form it into a laboratory. The owner will give us his response in a bit, but he seemed very interested by our research.”

“And Hollenback?” asked Hopper with a bit of anxiety in his voice.

“Unfortunately, I haven't gotten any more news about him for some time now. He changed his name and joined a criminal organisation... He managed to cover his tracks. We thought he was an idiot, but actually, he is very intelligent. We even call him the 'Magician.'”

Hopper placed a big crate on the ground and showed his friend the pendant that he wore under his sweater. This was the one that Aelita knew, with the *W* and the *A* engraved on it.

“Anthea is alive and doing well” said the professor. “That's what this pendant tells me. So, I will continue to look for her, day and night, until I find her.”

“I will always be here to help you” assured Major Steinback. “Anthea was my best friend. I swore to bring her back to you and your daughter...no matter what.”

Aelita once again found herself in front of the hollow tree on the strange flatland of the replica.

Being in a virtual world was always tiring for her and often gave her vertigo, but this time, with all these stories, her father and the disappearance of her mother, and finally this Major Steinback who was working for the army and who Aelita had never heard of before...

“Go on!” Jeremy urged. “Face the third tree!”

“What does the computer say?” asked the young girl.

“It’s not very clear” answered the schoolboy with a yawn. “It’s written that we’ll access a new level of the replica. And there’s also this note: *Enter only when your heart is ready.*”

“But I’m super ready!” declared Aelita. “Let’s go!”

“Uh...” replied Jeremy yawning once more. “Maybe this isn’t a good idea! It’s five in the morning, you haven’t slept, and for tonight, you’ve already had a big dose of surprises, right? The replica won’t run away! It’d be better to come back with the others when we are more rested. At the end of the day, we didn’t find any monsters, but we don’t know what could be hiding on the new level of this strange private diary.”

Jeremy’s yawns were contagious, because Aelita suddenly felt very tired too!

“Maybe...you might be right...” she sighed.

“Perfect!” cried her friend. “Then get ready, because... Materialisation!”

The young girl watched her body devirtualise: her arms and her legs became completely transparent and eventually disappeared. The instant afterwards, she blinked and saw that she was already inside the scanner in the secret room of the Hermitage.

The door of the scanner slid to the side...Jeremy was there to hug her!

“How are you?” he asked her sweetly.

“Good, really good” she replied. “But I need a bit of sleep...”

They laughed.

EPILOGUE

“Oh, Odd! Finally, you’re here!” cried Ulrich upon seeing his friend crossing the school hallway with Eva.

The two school kids were holding hands, and the young boy had a dazzling smile.

“Haha!” snickered Yumi. “So, that’s why we didn’t see you yesterday. You were too busy...”

“So, Odd, what’s been going on?” asked Ulrich. “What have you been up to? Tell us everything!”

“Oh, nothing in particular” responded the runaway. “I just went for a little stroll...”

Suddenly, Jeremy and Aelita joined the group of friends. Both seemed not to have slept a wink...

“So, what’s with you guys today?” insisted Ulrich, surprised.

Jeremy adjusted his glasses on the end of his nose and announced, “We have some news! Yesterday, Aelita discovered a new secret room in the cellar of the Hermitage.”

“Wow! That’s so cool!” exclaimed Odd. “And what was inside?”

Everyone gathered in a circle to listen to Aelita. She started to tell them about all the events from the last night, but she had trouble talking, because she was constantly being interrupted!

At the end of Aelita’s story, Eva, who was leaning against the wall, murmured, “Looks like a new adventure is about to begin!”

“Or maybe the old one isn’t over yet!” Ulrich clarified. “Because a bunch of mysteries remain...”

“We will solve them together!” concluded Jeremy.

The group of friends were so absorbed in the news that none of them noticed Ms. Hertz passing by to start class. She was wearing a white lab coat and had with her a blue dossier.

She had heard the last sentence from her favourite student and smiled while announcing, “Jeremy, I don’t know if you’ll manage to solve them this time or not, because for today’s lesson, I’ve prepared some really difficult problems! ...come on, get to class all of you!”

Yumi waved them goodbye and went to her class, while Odd and Ulrich sighed: a new day of classes began!

Aelita hung back for a moment. She watched her friends enter class, then Professor Hertz place a hand on Jeremy’s shoulder.

Ms. Hertz... For a moment, the young girl tried to imagine her several years in the past, younger, with short hair and no

◆ EPILOGUE ◆

glasses, wearing the uniform of a major in the army... Was it possible?

Aelita stopped herself while laughing: no, of course not, what was she thinking? The professor couldn't be a secret agent!

She hurried to class and closed the door behind her.

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**ENTER INTO LYOKO,
A UNIVERSE CONTROLLED BY X.A.N.A.
AND THE DEMONIC CYBERNETIC
FORCES.**

**WHEN
JEREMY, ULRICH,
ODD AND YUMI DISCOVER THE
RECORDING OF THE VIDEO OF AELITA'S
FATHER, THEY'RE DEVASTATED. ANTHEA,
THEIR FRIEND'S MOTHER, WAS KIDNAPPED AND
NOBODY KNOWS IF SHE'S STILL ALIVE. THE COUNTDOWN
HAS BEGUN. THEY SET OFF ON A SEARCH FOR HER
CONVINCED THAT THEY'LL BE ABLE TO FIND A TRACE.
BECAUSE THEY'RE THE ONLY ONES WHO HOLD THE KEYS
TO THE SECRET HISTORY OF LYOKO...ALMOST.
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WITH FORCE, CRUELTY, AND
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