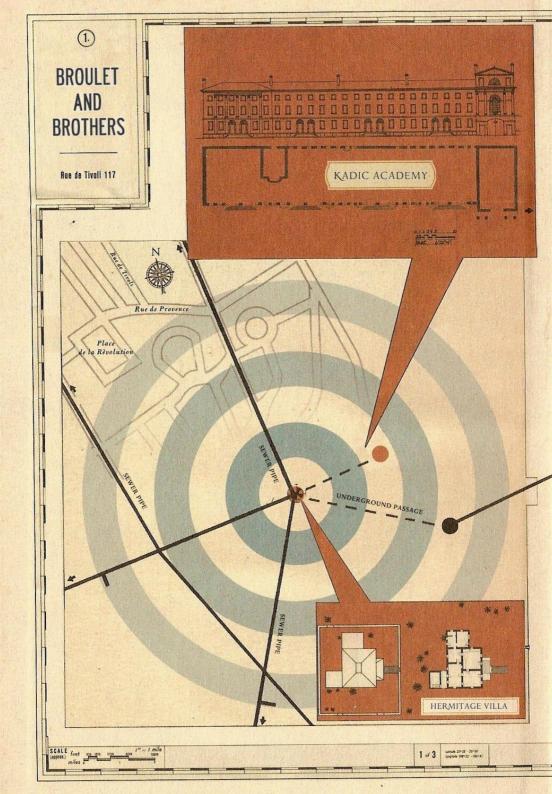
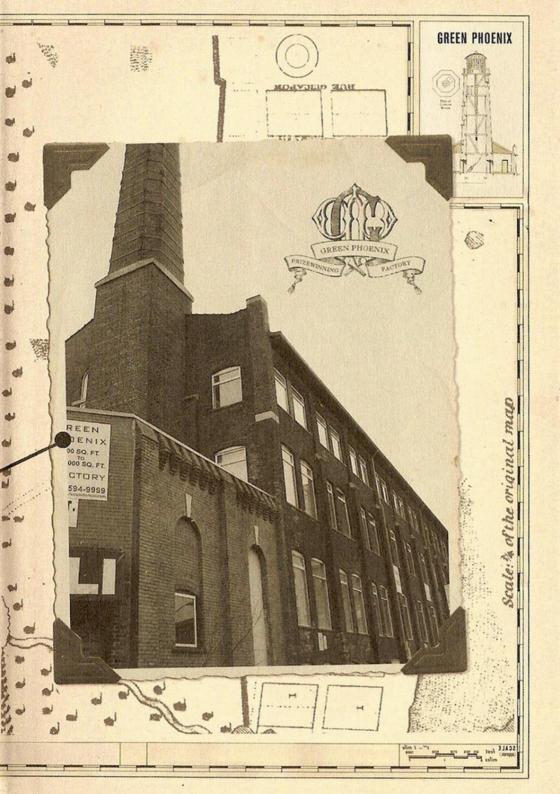


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Tonight it will be ten years since I first met her,
And I've decided the time has come to tell our story.

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

1

A BUTTERFLY AT THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA

(THE SEA OF JAPAN, DECEMBER 21ST)

They say that if a butterfly flaps its wings in Beijing, in New York there is rain instead of sunshine...

Quite possibly they are right, at least some of the time, but it is difficult to say: everyone notices when it starts raining, but the fact remains that no-one is ever in a position to trace the butterfly responsible...

On Tuesday, December 21st, at 2:26pm, the ship *KNT-17* came to rest at anchor in the wide expanse of the Sea of Japan, and one of the officers made radio contact with the ship's land base.

"We are in position."

On the receiving end of the message was Yukiko Itou, a beautiful Japanese girl some twenty-three years of age, listening in from the ship's land base. From the calm of her

workstation Yukiko controlled several screens that encircled her, and adjusting a microphone to her mouth she replied:

"Base here, all clear. You have permission to launch Rovvy whenever you want."

The KNT-17 was a "cable ship": her mission was to monitor the telecommunications cables that connected Japan to the United States. This simple-sounding task had one major complication however: the cables were at a depth of more than a thousand metres below sea-level. And here was where "Rovvy" entered the game, as the staff who oversaw the intense operation familiarly thought of it. In spite of the irreverent nickname, Rovvy was in fact a highly sophisticated robot. An ROV: Remotely Operated Vehicle, and about the only thing capable of operating undisturbed in the unimaginable pressures of the ocean abysses.

From the monitors of her workstation Yukiko was presented with a twin view. One was of the robot, looking like a gigantic yellow hermit crab as it descended towards the waves, suspended from the boom of a large crane, and on the other display was the face of the officer who was her counterpart aboard the ship.

"How are you, sweet creature," his voice squawked from the radio transmitter.

Yukiko laughed, "You mean me?"

"No, you misunderstood me, I was speaking to Rovvy!"

She laughed, "Focus on the job, the longer we waste time, the longer Japan remains disconnected from the Internet!"



♦ A BUTTERFLY AT THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA ♦

Six hours ago the cable deep below the *KNT-17* had begun to experience intermittent signal loss, and it was quickly becoming worrisome. Through it passed the majority of telephone and email signals exchanged between Japan and America, and vice-versa. They had to act quickly, but with precision.

Diving speedily underwater, thanks to its powerful helix-shaped propellers, Rovvy soon intercepted the cable, a giant black snake that lay on the seafloor, stretching to infinity in both directions. All around the ocean was silent and lifeless. At this depth, there were not even any fish. Without the luminous bundle of lights suspended ahead of the robot's watertight television camera, the screen in front of Yukiko would have seemed completely extinguished.

Several minutes passed.

Then, the hush was broken by the sudden sound of the officer's voice in her headphones.

"We seem to have found the source of the breakdown. Looks like it was nothing too serious."

From one of Rovvy's internal compartments a mechanical arm emerged, then it grew and extended until it grazed the surface of the cable.

And at that moment, Yukiko's electronic instrumentation went berserk.

"Wait, it's stopped!" she yelled instinctively.

"What's happened?"



"It was...an incredible data burst, I think. I don't know how to explain it, but...it seems like a blockage cleared in the cable."

"Yukiko, can you repeat that, you sound upset?"

"You heard me perfectly! As soon as you touched the cable, the signal resumed!"

"But I'd only grazed it! And how do you explain a fibreoptic cable becoming 'blocked'?"

The girl ignored the comment and quickly glanced to her monitors. No matter how she looked at it, everything seemed to have slotted back into place. The telecommunications signals were relaying perfectly.

"Do you want us to proceed with the repairs anyway?"

"No, continuing would serve nothing. Suspend the mission. Recover Rovvy and return to home base."

"Perfect. Then tonight we can go out together?"
Yukiko smiled and tidied up a lock of hair behind her ear.
"Sure, why not?"

While in Japan the Internet was resuming normal operations, in France a thirteen-year-old girl was having breakfast in the cafeteria of Kadic Academy. She was known as Aelita Stones, but in the course of her short life had been called by many names. Not tall for her age, she had a small, upturned nose, large eyes and hair the colour of flame styled in a helmet-bob. She wore comfortable dungarees and had a serious air about her that contrasted with the joy of the other stu-

♦ A BUTTERFLY AT THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA ♦

dents. Around her table the atmosphere was festive; it was the penultimate day of school before the Christmas holidays, and lessons would only be resumed twenty days later in January. Bags of time to spend at home in the company of their families.

Aelita however, had other plans, which were not as pleasant. Her parents, in fact, were no more. She had the impression that centuries had passed in which she was alone in the world. Since that horrible day when her father...

"Is everything alright?" someone called and she turned to the familiar features of Jeremy. Jeremy Belpois was thirteen years old like her, but his hair was blond, worn slightly long, and round glasses perched on his nose. Jeremy was an important person to her, especially since that terrible day on which her father...

"Aelita?"

The girl was frozen, her croissant in mid-air and her mouth ajar, a lost look in her empty eyes.

"She's just paralysed with emotion," commented a third friend. Odd Della Robbia was grinning like usual, his hair spiked back from his head in its usual rock star look. "So Jeremy, our diabolical plan is ready?" Odd said, turning to his friend.

"To the most minute detail," Jeremy agreed, "Aelita will come to my home for Christmas. My mother's ecstatic at having a girl to spoil."

"What about you?"



"Put a sock in it Odd."

"Ah, our little computer science romance..."

Jeremy flared up, but he continued to speak as if nothing had happened, staring down at his plate, "We'll return to the Academy on Sunday the 9th, a day before lessons resume."

"Perfect! What have you told your parents?"

"That we're staying with Ulrich's family for that night."

"So have I! Hopefully they won't check! And what about the others, do you know how they feel?"

"No, but we've already discussed everything. I don't believe there will be any difficulties."

"Hey, Aelita, still here with us?" Odd suddenly asked the girl, having noticed that throughout their conversation she had not moved a single muscle. The croissant was still frozen in front of her nose.

"Aelita, if this is intended as a joke it isn't amusing," Jeremy said with a worried air.

The girl stared fixedly at him, batting her eyelids uncertainly.

"Jeremy...is that your name, honestly?"

He stared incredulously, and then she laughed in embarrassment. Odd pretended to play along with her game: "Yes, he's Jeremy and I'm Odd. We're your best friends. Don't you remember?"

He'd intended it as a witty remark, but Aelita did not laugh.

"No," she replied.



2

THE EMPTY HOUSE

(CITY OF THE IRON TOWER, FRANCE, JANUARY 9TH)

The New Year greeted the world with exceptionally cold weather.

On the morning of Sunday, January 9, the train arrived at the station an hour late. The rails were just two pronounced dark strips. It had snowed all night, and the snow continued to fall even now. When the train's doors opened with a gasp, Jeremy helped Aelita unload their suitcases.

"Welcome back guys," a voice greeted them from the platform, "I've been waiting a while for you."

The voice belonged to Ulrich Stern, a tall and wiry boy wrapped up in a red quilted jacket. He had donned a woollen cap to protect himself from the wind, but from under its brim a dark and rebelliously pointed forelock fell onto his forehead.

Aelita and Jeremy were delighted to see him again.

"Hey Ulrich, did the holidays go well for you?"

Their friend shook his head and Jeremy knew better than to press any further. Ulrich was going through an ugly period where he rarely agreed with his parents on anything.

Ulrich raised the two suitcases without effort and turned to the girl: "Aelita, how are you? How was life at Casa Belpois?"

Aelita smiled, "Jeremy's parents have been wonderful! And his mother is a fantastic cook!"

"Magnificent," Ulrich murmured. Then he looked at them in silence, unsure of how to ask the question that had weighed most on his mind while he'd waited at the station. In the end, he chose his favourite approach, to confront the problem directly: "So now...is your memory becoming any clearer?"

Aelita pressed the coat tighter to herself. Her breath misted out of her mouth in light clouds, "we think it is. I remember who you are, and that's something!"

Ulrich smiled.

They started through the streets of the city, slipping on the gravel surfaces.

The snow gave everything an unusual, almost unreal aspect: the pavement becoming confused with the asphalt and the grass of gardens, like a single, soft, white carpet.

"Cold, isn't it? I'm afraid we're all going to freeze in that empty house..." Jeremy grumbled, shuddering.



"Don't worry," Ulrich reassured, "Yumi slipped away ahead of us to light the boiler. It'll be like a fairy tale."

"Is Odd already back in the city?" Jeremy enquired, blowing on his frozen hands.

"He got back this morning. He's helping Yumi prepare the house."

"Fantastic."

"Yeah," agreed Ulrich "our 'diabolical plan', as Odd keeps calling it, is working perfectly."

The plan to return to the city one day before classes resumed, unbeknownst to their parents, had been Jeremy's idea. The goal was to spend one single Sunday together, with no-one else interfering in their affairs. He and Odd were allegedly staying at Ulrich's house, while Ulrich was supposedly at Jeremy's, and Yumi at Aelita's. To avoid the risk of being exposed, Jeremy had used a reliable old computer application of his own creation to mimic the voice of each parent and had called the individual families to confirm the various excuses.

It was indeed, a diabolical plan.

And now, thanks to it, they had the time and peace necessary to tackle a certain issue.

Someone had cleaned the snow from the wooden plate affixed to the gate, and now the inscription 'HERMITAGE' was quite legible. Beyond the fence the garden had the same lunar aspect as the rest of the city. A double row of footprints

had ploughed the snow up to the steps of the porch leading to the front door. The Hermitage was a high and narrow standalone villa, three stories tall above the basement, with a drooping roof and a low garage that leaned against the house as if to support it. Surrounding them were snow-covered fir trees that grew thicker towards the rear of the building, where only a single line of low fencing separated the garden from the grounds of Kadic Academy.

Aelita observed the darkened windows, the white colonnade that supported the porch, the trees.

"Do you remember this house?" Jeremy asked.

"Vaguely, but it's more like a sensation...like this was a place to which I felt a great attachment."

Jeremy nodded, "I would say that was a positive start! It's promising, but we'd better get indoors before even our thoughts freeze."

Inside, Odd was attaching a colourful festoon to the ceiling. As soon as he heard them open the door, he vaulted down the staircase with cat-like agility.

He gave a vigorous slap on the shoulder to Ulrich and ran to embrace Aelita in a hug, while Jeremy threw a jealous look at him.

"Hi guys," greeted Yumi, hurling herself out of the kitchen, smiling in her usual thin, enigmatic way, but her almond eyes shining.

Yumi Ishiyama was the last one in their group of friends, the eldest of them and, at least in theory the most responsible. Tall and lean, she loved to dress in black, the same colour as her gleaming raven hair. Her parents were Japanese natives who had moved to France when she was a newborn.

"How were your holidays?" Jeremy asked her.

"Not bad. I managed to go skiing. And yours?"

The conversation was suddenly interrupted by the din of things being thrown into the air. An instant later Kiwi, Odd's scrappy little dog, appeared and began to happily run about between them, his stumpy tail waggling furiously.

Between welcome-back hugs and slaps, the friends shared stories of their vacations like sweets. Then the moment had passed and they decided they should put themselves to work. Ulrich climbed onto the staircase to continue arranging the festoons, while Odd and Jeremy, the cooks of the group, moved into the kitchen. Yumi's mother had prepared a large tray of pasta to go in the oven, and the other expenses had been covered by the girl herself, buying popcorn, drinks, a precooked roast and one sack of potatoes.

"Try to avoid cutting yourself on the finger," Jeremy recommended, while Odd squatted down on a chair, the potato peeler in his hand.

His friend ignored the jab, "So, tell me: how's Aelita?" he asked suddenly, as if it was the thing that mattered the most to him

"Well," Jeremy said, tightening his shoulders, "Her memory has almost completely returned now. She remembers us and several events from the last few years..."

He pondered for a moment, before adding: "except Lyoko." "What do you mean, 'except Lyoko'?"

Jeremy sighed, "What I mean is that every memory she has regarding Lyoko has been completely eradicated from her mind."

"And her memories of X.A.N.A.?"

"X.A.N.A. too."

Odd finished peeling one potato and took hold of another, "I meant to ask if you thought this amnesia was X.A.N.A.'s fault."

"Impossible," Jeremy sighed, his heart heavy, "X.A.N.A. is dead."

"Whoa! I'm stuffed," Ulrich exclaimed, allowing himself to lean back in his chair.

"And guess who has to do the dishes," winked Odd.

"Hey hey, don't talk to me about that! That's a woman's work!"

Yumi thrust out to jab her elbow in his stomach, "Me and Aelita were thinking of helping you," she said with a malicious smile, "But since, as you say 'it's a woman's work', we'll leave that honour to you."

Ulrich grumbled, while the others sniggered with relish.



Suddenly Jeremy rose from the table, disappeared for an instant into an adjacent room and returned carrying a satchel.

"The plates can wait guys. What do you say to going on a walking tour?" he proposed enthusiastically.

Odd was not much for the idea, "Have you seen the weather Einstein?" he protested, indicating out the window, "It's at least a thousand degrees below zero. And I bet it's going to start snowing again soon."

"It doesn't snow at a thousand degrees below zero," 'Einstein' said patiently, while Odd snorted and rolled his eyes at the ceiling, "And in any case we don't have to go particularly far. Just up to Kadic's grounds."

Yumi regarded Jeremy with a serious expression on her face. "What do you have in mind?" she asked.

Jeremy had opened the bag he had recovered and extracted a little digital camcorder from it.

"I wanted to do a video diary," he explained, "I thought it could be fun to tell this camcorder everything that's happened to us. And for all we know it might one day prove useful to us."

"A perfect idea," Yumi nodded, convinced.

"Actually I'm with Odd," commented Ulrich, "I don't understand why we should put in so much effort..."

Yumi elbowed him in the stomach a second time, this time with more precision and force.

"Ah!"



"So, shall we give this a chance?" Jeremy exhorted, this time not meeting with any objections.

They slipped on their coats and scarves and ventured outdoors. The sky was a clear grey that was deepening to violet: snow weather. Jeremy led the way round the back of the house, Odd and Aelita alternating behind him. Ulrich brought up the rear and drew closer to Yumi.

"You could have been a bit gentler with those elbows," he murmured resentfully.

"Aren't you supposed to be the big martial arts champion?" she pressed back, "And don't tell me you don't understand why Jeremy has proposed this."

"Um, to tell you the truth, no."

"It's obviously for Aelita, right? If we talk about Lyoko, from the beginning to the end, she'll possibly recover her memory."

Ulrich dragged his cap lower down his forehead, a little unconvinced.

They went out of the Hermitage's back gate and struck out across the school's grounds. Here the snow lay so high that it nearly reached their knees and everything was immersed in a soft silence. Kiwi proceeded by hops and bounds, disappearing at intervals into the white expanse. They walked until they could just glimpse the dark shapes of Kadic's palatial buildings, the sloping roofs appearing black against the pale background of the winter sky. Eventually the group stopped

in a small glade, completely alone: Jeremy and Odd started digging in the snow with their hands.

"You'll see," Ulrich whispered to Yumi, "Odd won't be able to resist five seconds. Four...three..."

He got as far as 'one', at which point Odd scooped some fresh snow into his hands, compacted it into a big ball and flung it at them with all his strength.

Ulrich ducked and the ball struck Yumi square in the face.

"Ha ha!" Ulrich laughed, slapping her on the shoulder.

"What did I tell you?"

"You're going to pay for that Odd," Yumi cried, her hands already sinking into the snow.

And in the next instant, battle broke out.

"Enough, enough, I surrender," Aelita panted, several minutes later.

She allowed herself to fall on the ground beside Jeremy, who had raised his own white flag shortly into the fight.

The rush for snowballs had cleared a beautiful glade of snow, and set in the green tufts of grass was the rusted iron disc of a big manhole cover.

Although there was nothing strange about the manhole itself (it was about the commonest of circular metal plates) it was unusual in that it was not in the centre of a road, but instead in the middle of a beautiful private park, amidst the grass and the trees.

"Ulrich!" Jeremy called, preparing the camcorder, "could you begin to tell us, from the beginning. Ulrich, you can start. Hello?"

"Well, in truth you must have been the first to go down the manhole, not me..."

"Come on Ulrich, it's not difficult," insisted Yumi. "If you begin, I'll help you with the dishes later. Done deal?"

"Well, if that's the case," he gave in, clearing his throat.

Even if they had none of their own, they all understood Jeremy's motives for choosing to start at the manhole. It was down there that everything had begun...

To Ulrich, Jeremy was little more than the class swot. Since they'd both entered Kadic Academy they'd only ever shared a few hastily grumbled 'hello's. It was not until much, much later that Ulrich had actually noticed Jeremy.

Seen from the air, Kadic Academy resembled a gigantic fork. From the main gate one entered the vast grounds, bisected by two tree-lined avenues that led up to the entrance into the administrative building. Behind that the structures formed a series of horseshoes, so that they created three large courtyards: one surrounded by classrooms, the central one, which held the two low buildings that served as the school's refectories, and finally the largest courtyard, which extended into the sports ground.

That day Ulrich was standing next to one of the drinks machines scattered around the campus. With him was Odd, his

new roommate, who was speaking non-stop and gesturing wildly, while he quietly sipped a drink from a can. At a certain point, Jeremy had approached the machine, had inserted a coin and pressed a key. What followed was an electric shock so great as to make him drop to the ground like a sack of potatoes.

After a moment's hesitation, Ulrich had run to assist and accompanied Jeremy into the infirmary. Fortunately nothing serious had happened to the swot. Ulrich had greeted him and then left in a pensive state of mind.

Some days later, Ulrich had heard cries coming from Jeremy's room. He burst in running to find his classmate attempting to fight off some kind of tin box on tiny wheels: evidently one of his science projects had gone haywire.

"Give me a hand! Shut it off!"

Ulrich had pulled the robot's plug from the wall socket, returning everything to normal.

"Thanks."

"Figures. Guess I've developed a taste for saving your skin."

Jeremy Belpois had regarded him seriously from behind the tarnished lenses of his glasses and, after a moment of silence, had declared, "There's more to it than you know."

"What do you mean?"

"I can't explain it to you, not here."

"So where can you?"

"Outside. In the grounds. But not right now, wait until tomorrow.

Ulrich had stared incredulously for several seconds. But in the end, he had nodded his assent.

The sun was sparkling between the leaves, projecting a green and fresh light over everything. The shadows cast by the trees provided a bit of relief on that hot spring day. Ulrich had watched perplexedly as his new friend had jumped like a rabbit from one bush to another.

"Are you sure this is the right place?"

Jeremy glanced archly at him in retort, "No-one's obliging you to be here."

"I'm here because of you. I don't trust myself to leave you alone, given your amazing talent for attracting trouble..."

The truth was however that the comical boy in the glasses, who until recently had always played the role of a mysterious hermit, had now tickled his curiosity.

"Here, here!" Jeremy finally exclaimed, "Found it!"

The manhole that rose from the grass definitely left a strange impression. It was decidedly out of place, like a chicken using a city crosswalk, or a man wearing a swimsuit to a formal dinner.

"Give me a hand," Jeremy said.

Together, the two boys managed to lift the heavy iron plate. A series of rusted handles led down into a vertical



shaft, disappearing in the dark. The smell that wafted up from the bottom was definitely unpleasant.

"And we have to go down there?!"

"I'm not forcing you to hear my story," Jeremy said curtly, already lowering himself into the hole.

Ulrich hesitated for a moment until he gathered himself together, and followed purposefully, climbing down into the shaft like a blind man.

Further and further down.

Suddenly, his foot did not land on another rung but only empty air. His legs swung out and, unwilling to release his grip on the rungs, he was left immobile, hanging in the shaft like a length of salami.

Then he heard Jeremy's voice resounding up from beneath him: "What are you doing up there? That's the end of the ladder. You've got to jump."

"Excuse me? Did you say 'jump'?"

"Come on, it's no more than a metre and a half."

Caught in the concrete pipe, Ulrich began to ask himself what he had done to deserve this. Jeremy had seemed to be a quiet boy, but evidently something was not right in his head. Like all the great geniuses, some of his cogs must be out of place.

"Ulrich! Get moving!"

Ulrich let go. He tumbled down and quickly rose to his feet, surprised to find himself still intact. He checked around and saw that they were in a wide and badly illuminated tun-

nel, so deep that he could not even glimpse the roof. He also noticed that his trousers were soaked. Something like a grey river was flowing in the bottom of the tunnel and...oh, he had never smelt a stench like it! The stink that impregnated the air was nearly solid.

"I-I can't breathe," he gasped.

"That's soiled water," Jeremy explained calmly, "we're in the sewers after all, my friend."

"Oh, the ideal place for a perfect picnic!"

"Well then, brace yourself. The sooner we push on, the sooner we get out."

Ulrich had to repeat that twice to himself.

The two boys set off along a kind of pavement that skirted the edge of the filthy water's culvert. Their shadows grew long and tall on the curved walls, contorting themselves into monstrous figures, while around them the absolute silence was broken only by the sound of their footsteps and some frightened squeaks.

"Rats?" ventured Ulrich.

"Poor little boy, what part of 'we are in the sewers' don't you understand? Obviously they're rats. And if you really want to know, those black things floating around down there are..."

"Ok! Ok! I understand!" Ulrich interrupted him with a hasty gesture.

After some time the tunnel was abruptly interrupted: a grating barred the passage across its full width, making fur-

ther progress impossible. Here a new set of iron rungs was embedded in the wall, disappearing upwards.

"That's how we return to the surface."

Ulrich sighed. He was certain the smell of the sewers would be impregnated into his clothes forever.

At the top of the climb a second metal trapdoor awaited them. When they shifted it the sunlight almost blinded them.

Ulrich scrambled up and out.

And his breath was taken away.

They had come out onto the bridge leading to the old factory, a gigantic building that occupied the entirety of a solitary, sun-beaten island. Around them, the waters of the river than ran a short distance from Kadic gurgled tranquilly. Behind Ulrich, a great gate surmounted by barbed wire blocked the road which, at one time, had allowed trucks to cross the city's industrial quarter to reach the factory.

Now the asphalt was cracked and broken, and tufts of green grass were pushing up here and there through the carriageway.

And the bridge did not seem to be in the best of condition either: the metal spans were covered in rust and had a decidedly precarious look to them. But the panorama was definitely one of a kind: the bridge enjoyed a spectacular view over the river and, in the distance, over the deserted sheds, could be seen the tops of trees and the majestic profile of the buildings at Kadic.

"Beautiful, eh?" smiled Jeremy.

"Yeah. Dunno why there's nobody here anymore."

"I've made some research into it, and...well, come up with nothing. The factory failed when we were both little. Instead of selling it, for some reason the owners preferred to leave it here to moulder. Then the new industrial zone was built outside the city, and this quarter went to ruin."

Jeremy paused and regarded the whole of the island.

"Sooner or later someone will buy it and build us a car park. Or office buildings. Or perhaps a hotel even," he concluded.

The factory, with its extinguished smokestacks, had a melancholy air. Ulrich thought it was certainly not a bad idea to take advantage of all its vacant space: you could replace it with arenas, skateboard tracks, business premises. Or perhaps build an amusement park that would really turn heads.

"Let's go," Jeremy said, setting out across the bridge.

"Where?"

"It seems obvious enough to me. Into the factory."



3

ERIK MCKINSKY

(MASSACHUSETTS, UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, JANUARY 9TH)



"So are you gonna be here for the baseball game this afternoon?"

"Sure, I guess...I don't really know...I might have other stuff to do."

"Are you still stuck on that music group?"

"It's not a 'group'. It's the band of the century!"

"So you keep telling me..."

The first to speak of the two boys sitting on the fringe of the pitch was eleven-year-old Mark Holeman, a slim youth who was pulling on a scarf and cap bearing the colours of the Rippety Indians, the school's baseball squad. The second boy, Erik McKinsky, was of the same age, but was instead donning a fluorescent 'Ceb Digitals' jacket: the so-called

'band of the century'. On its back there was a striking image of Gardenia, the group's new singer, hurdling over a guitar like a witch straddling her broomstick. In front of the boys spread the exposed and windswept playing field of the Rippety Indians. To their backs, the modernistic and somewhat oppressive frontage of Rippety School loomed threateningly: like an immense pink cube broken at random intervals with wide glass windows.

Mark tore at tufts of the yellowish grass and sighed.

"Look, I hear you...the Ceb Digitals are great and Gardenia is fantastic, but..."

"Great? Fantastic? She is divine! And this afternoon is their big concert..."

"Erik, can you hear yourself? You've gotten to the point where you can't think of anything else. You shut yourself in your room and listen to their albums. Then you go online and check their site, and then you channel surf to find their latest video..."

"So what?" Erik curtly answered, trying to hide that he was drawing an earpiece from his pocket and slipping it into his ear. It was perhaps the thirteenth time in a row that he'd listen to Luv Luv Punka, the band's latest single. They were huge.

"It's stupid! There's more to life than the Ceb Digitals."

"Like what, at least it's better than standing here watching the Indians rip up the field...instead of the opposite team. You really should be playing for them."



♦ ERIK MCKINSKY ♦

It was a low blow and Erik immediately regretted it. Mark's greatest dream was to play on the school team. For two years, he had attended every single training session and had tried any means he could imagine to convince the coach to take him on the team. But no matter how great his efforts they were never rewarded: Mark was truly hopeless at baseball.

"At least I'm outdoors!"

"But it's the middle of winter! And, in case you'd forgotten, its freezing!"

That at least was true. They rose and ran to reclaim the bicycles that they had abandoned by the metallic net that surrounded the pitch.

Erik screeched to a halt on the frozen driveway and left his bike propped against a mailbox on which someone had written *McKINSKY* in crooked letters.

"Mum, I'm home!" he yelled, opening the door. He let his rucksack fall to the floor as he unzipped his jacket. From the corner of his eye he glimpsed his mother in the living room, stretched out over a blue exercise mat.

"Hello...darling!" she gasped "I'm...just...exercising!"

Erik's mother was an aerobics fanatic, and spent her mornings engaged in 'warm-up exercises', as she called them, and then in the afternoon she went to her gym.

"I'm going up to my room!"

"I'll just finish...stretching...and then come say...hello to you!"

On his computer's monitor the words *MUSIC-OH* flashed. And then *CONNECTION ESTABLISHED*.

The loudspeakers blasted Luv Luv Punka at full volume and from Erik's desktop background the violet eyes of Gardenia seemed to spy on him.

There were twenty-two unread emails. The official Ceb Digitals newsletter, someone who wanted to buy his tickets to the concert and who was willing to pay "any amount you want" for them, and new messages from the Music-Oh forums. He dedicated himself to answering those, retreating to his peaceful inner space.

One user, a certain Lisette93 had written:

Hiiiiiiiiii Erik!!!! Like this site has the awesomest content and u have all the answers and ur on these forums so u must be a true fan like me as well!!!!

Erik was ready to delete the message when the next line caught his attention.

But like to prove myself I've got something supersecret: a photo of Gardenia when she was worked as waitress and what she was doing b4 her beautiful voice made her 1 true star!



♦ ERIK MCKINSKY ♦

If you want see what I've found click...

Erik felt a shiver grip him. All true Ceb Digitals fans knew that before joining the group with the guitarist Freno, Gardenia had worked as a waitress at a restaurant in Boston called *Skate Willy*. And everyone knew that any evidence of Gardenia's time there: every photo of her, any scrap of paper with her signature on it, even the T-shirts she had worn, had all been 'destroyed' by the band's manager when they became a major success. Not a single image of Gardenia in the uniform of a 'Willy Girl' was known to exist, and if one did, well; its value would be incalculable.

Lisette93's email did not contain any attachments, just a link, and Erik's hand was trembling as he moved to click on it.

"Here I am, baby!" chirped his mother as she burst into his bedroom, wrapped in a cloud of peach-scented perfume.

"Come downstairs, I made you a snack."

Erik was still fixed on the screen, a vacant expression on his face.

"I'll come now. One minute."

His mother affectionately tousled his hair.

"Heh, always on the computer. It's not healthy. Let's go, it's already ten and you've not yet gotten anything inside you."

Her tone did not allow for anything but a 'yes'. Erik reluctantly realised that he'd have to postpone his rendezvous

with Gardenia.

And at that moment, inside the boy's computer, another being resigned itself to waiting. The digital creature floated shapelessly in an infinite void, without a name and without memories. For so long it had lain in waiting at the bottom of the sea. Like a larva enclosed in its cocoon waiting for the right moment to break free and become an adult. Then, lights had cut the darkness like a blade. A mechanical hand had approached slowly, sluggish under the weight of metre upon cubic metre of water. It grazed the surface...

And so it had woken the creature up.

But it did not understand why it existed. Nor did it know its purpose.

It only felt a desperate need to win back its memories. It was sure they still existed, in some form, but where? It had to find them: they would help it understand what it had to do.

The 'thing' hidden in Erik's computer could feel that its memories awaited it, sealed in an invisible safe. It needed a key to open it. It needed an eye with which to examine the keyhole in the lock.

Oh, yes. The eye.

That was what it needed most of all: its eye.

The Eye of X.A.N.A.

Erik meanwhile had downed a disgusting carrot frappe, while suffering through his mother's usual sermon: "You've



◆ ERIK MCKINSKY ◆

spent the entire vacation shut inside your room listening to music. You could at least go outside with your friend Mark, or play some sports..."

While he had pretended to listen, Erik had felt a nervousness growing within him: he could not get that email out of his head.

As soon as his mother had resumed devoting herself to her exercises, he had bolted into his bedroom and locked the door, to ensure he wouldn't be disturbed this time.

If you want see what I've found click...

Erik held his breath, expectant. Then, the emotion transformed into fear. Not even the thought of the Ceb Digitals could penetrate this subtle terror, the sensation that there is something terrible behind the closed door you are about to open. His hand hesitated on the mouse. Click.

Gardenia's great violet eyes did not appear onscreen.

There was no photo, to tell the truth.

Instead, there was a drawing.

In the centre was a circle, with two further concentric rings surrounding it. The outermost one was broken by a single thin line at the top, and three thicker lines towards the bottom.

"The usual con," Erik muttered in disappointment.

Nevertheless he continued to dwell on the drawing. What did it represent, exactly? A target? A symbol?

Erik found it impossible to avert his gaze from the screen. He did not know why, but the design made something very specific come to mind.

An eye.

He clicked on it.



4

THE UNDERGROUND CASTLE

(CITY OF THE IRON TOWER, FRANCE, SOME TIME AGO)

In actual fact, things had been set in motion a little while before Ulrich had joined Jeremy down in the sewers. At the point where everything had truly begun, Jeremy was alone.

Every semester Professor Hertz would announce a competition in class for the most original science project, and Jeremy had always won first place hands-down. On this occasion he had decided to design and build a miniature robot, but he lacked some components needed to complete his prototype and the school had not been able to provide anything suitable for him.

Then he had remembered the old abandoned factory not too far from Kadic, and realised that there he might be able to salvage something useable. And on a previous occasion

he had accidentally made an interesting discovery that now seemed provident, a secret passage that from Kadic's grounds led directly to the old factory...

From the outside, the iron disc of the manhole cover was completely anonymous. But once raised it revealed a strange symbol, with an equally mysterious inscription: *The Green Phoenix*. And that same symbol was stamped on the legs of the iron rungs down into the sewers. And it was marked on the walls of the culvert, as if indicating which direction to follow.

And finally, over the entrance to the old factory abandoned in the middle of the river, the same symbol had once been printed, although it had faded with time.

The Green Phoenix.

Across the sun-beaten bridge, the disused factory was cool and dusty. The main entryway opened onto a balcony suspended several metres above the ground. The place was immense, high and desolate. The walls were broken by footbridges and corridors, while steel beams supported cranes and other abandoned machinery. The windows were large glass grids facing out onto the river.

Much of the glass had been smashed, and many of the remaining panes were opaque with dust.

Nobody had set foot here for many years.

Jeremy decided to explore the ground floor. The last workers must have left behind a load of assorted junk: truck tyres

and pneumatics, electronic apparatus, girder sections, gutted pieces of machinery. As far as his robot was concerned, this was a gold mine. It was just a bummer that the stairs down to the ground floor had collapsed over the years, and all that remained of them now were just a few isolated metal steps that swung gently in midair. Jeremy then noticed two robust cables, hung from big hooks set in the ceiling. They were suspended just a short distance beyond the end of the balcony and extended right down to the ground, where they twisted snake-like into large coils.

Those should take my weight...

He seized one of the cables and pulled with all the force he could muster. There were no suspicious noises. It seemed solid.

"Geronimooooo!" he yelled, hanging from the cable with both hands and parting them slightly to slide down. Seconds later he tumbled headlong onto the dusty floor, his palms burning from the friction.

But he'd made it.

He began to wander through the abandoned shed in search of anything interesting. Then, almost by chance, he noticed the lift. It was a basic metal container, activated by a device that was connected to a wire that dangled from the control box. On it was a single red push-button, to descend down.

Goodness knows where this goes, Jeremy mused, and he tried pressing the button. In all seriousness, he did not be-

lieve the old elevator could still function; but then the security grate slid down and an old motor whirred to life.

Jeremy began to wonder if he had committed a serious error.

After almost a minute's descent into darkness the lift stopped and the grating rose again. A sensor released the locking mechanism on an automatic door, which opened with a soft hiss.

The walls of the great chamber in which he had arrived were emitting a greenish light, cold and electrical. From the ceiling was suspended an imposing apparatus studded with electrical wires and tubing, terminating in a massive hoop which hung in midair, like a giant chandelier. Below, set in the floor, was another raised circle that brought to mind teleportation devices from animated cartoons.

Only it wasn't a cartoon. It was real.

And it was right in front of him.

Jeremy was having trouble believing his own eyes. Down from the ceiling extended a mechanical arm that supported several extinguished monitor-screens and a keyboard. In front of the monitors was a comfortable armchair with a series of pushbuttons built into its armrests. A command station. The pilot's console of a spaceship.

In that moment Jeremy completely forgot his science project and every motive he previously had for being here. His brain was beginning to bubble over with thousands of new

questions: who had built such a thing in the basement of an old factory? Human beings? Aliens? And if so, then why?

He approached the console and a quick glance answered his first question. In front of the luxury screens was a normal American QWERTY keyboard, of a type most often used by computer programmers. Ergo, this place had been built by humans. It was improbable that aliens would have used the terrestrial alphabet.

But where was he exactly? In a military base? Or on the deserted set of a science-fiction movie?

Suddenly, Jeremy remembered the barbed wire that blocked off access to the bridge, and the various threatening signs scattered around the old factory: *DANGER, PRIVATE PROP-ERTY, HIGH TENSION WIRES...*

He looked around himself and considered that there were possibly security cameras hidden in the room. His presence here was, perhaps, being recorded and somewhere an alarm had already been raised by someone. If so they would soon be here to capture him.

Someone could be coming to kidnap him and have him 'disappear' forever.

But no matter how hard he strained, he could not imagine who that 'someone' could be...

"If I've only got a little time left," he announced aloud to reinforce his courage, "I at least want to use it to try and understand all this."

Then there was nothing left to do except to sit down in the control chair.

So he did...

...and discovered that doing so served nothing. The chair's controls were extinguished, as were the monitors and keyboard.

No power. Therefore, the solution to the problem was to find the master circuit-breaker.

Jeremy thoroughly explored the entire hall, the big computer affixed to the ceiling, the walls, the lights...he searched everywhere, but without results.

He got back into the elevator car in which he'd arrived, studying its wrought iron walls and the control-box with its single button.

And this would only take me back upstairs, I guess.

To verify his theory, he pressed the big red button and shortly afterwards was back on the factory's ground floor. He descended back down again into the computer hall.

It had wasted him five minutes, but he was following one of Professor Hertz's maxims: 'the road to science is paved with experiments; nothing should ever be taken for granted.'

Now he stopped for a moment to reflect. If the lift was the only exit, then the master switch for the power had to be somewhere in the room. But despite his efforts, he had failed to find it. And if there was one thing he could count on, it was that things of its kind were always rather visible.

So somewhere there had to be another exit, a hidden exit.



Jeremy sat down on the computer's control chair, relaxed, closed his eyes. This was like a test.

He began to spin himself on the chair's rotating pedestal, opening his eyes and shutting them again quickly in order to imprint on his mind multiple views of the room seen from different angles. The extinguished screens of the console and the keyboard, the bloated structure hanging from the roof. A green wall. The door to the lift.

Jeremy stopped. He opened his eyes and looked at the door again. It was decidedly much too modern in comparison to the smashed-up sheet-metal lift that was behind it.

This is a security door, thought Jeremy, it serves to protect something important.

In the room itself, nothing had power. Yet, the door was opening and closing without any difficulty. And the lift was going up and down.

Where's the logic in all of this?

Jeremy approached the door, trying to not activate the proximity sensor on the mechanism. The surface of the door was smooth and gave off an impression of sturdiness.

Then, the boy saw something he had not noticed before: there was a metal panel to the right of the door, of the same colour, but made from a different material.

Jeremy placed his hand against it. Nothing happened at all. Evidentially, aside from the automatic mechanism to open the door, everything else was disabled.

Ok, so he had followed a false clue, but that was no reason to lose heart. He was now sure that there was another room somewhere. And there had to be a way to access it.

He began to carefully survey the walls, tapping them at various heights and advancing only one step at a time. When he had circumnavigated the room's entire perimeter, without result, he lay down on the ground and began to inspect the floor, rapping on it with his knuckles until they began to ache.

Toc, toc, toc.

He began to doubt he would find anything this way, and it was now getting late.

Toc, toc.

He would have to return to the Academy soon, before someone noticed his absence.

Toc, toc.

It was strictly verboten to go away beyond the boundaries of the school, especially...

Toc, toc, dong, toc. Jeremy stopped. He crawled back, on his knees. *Toc. Dong.*

Here.

Dong.

He felt with his fingers for the nearly invisible seams of the metal plate, until his fingernails found a slightly raised edge. He pulled his Swiss Army knife from a pocket and inserted the tip into the thin groove. He applied leverage. The plate lifted. He drove the blade in deeper and tried again, then

threaded his fingers into the thin space that had been created, and pulled forcefully with both hands.

And he raised the trapdoor.

Below, there was a passageway, a dark hole that disappeared towards the bottom.

And a metal ladder on which to descend.

Through the passage, Jeremy entered a circular room whose walls were painted in the same warm colours as the strange devices that occupied it, but the main switch was certainly not located here.

Before him, arranged so as to form a perfect equilateral triangle, rose three high columns that were connected to the ceiling by numerous cables, pipes and other strange equipment. On each of the columns was a sliding door, each orientated in such a way as to face into the centre of the room. And all of the doors were sealed shut. It was immediately clear to Jeremy that the three columns were in some way controlled be a central computer and possibly the control station on the level above.

But...what purpose did they serve? Were they launch pads? And to launch what?

They seemed to be little more than ultramodern shower cubicles.

Jeremy decided to resume his search for the main switch. The only option left to him was to try going down further still. With a sigh, he slipped back into the stressful little passage,

the soles of his gym shoes slipping on the rungs, and continued his descent. He was beginning to feel short of breath.

Finally his feet touched the bottom.

He was in the dark.

He pulled his phone from a pocket and used its screen to throw a little light on his environment. And then, after a few passes, he noticed the door.

It was square and solid, and mounted on double-acting hinges that rendered forcing entry with a crowbar impossible.

Jeremy struck the surface with a closed fist, and the deep sound that emanated from within the door suggested that even an Oxy-Acetylene cutting torch would have little effect.

To the right of the door was a box made from white plastic, with a tiny screen like the liquid crystal displays on calculators, and an alphanumeric keypad underneath. The display was illegible from all the dust, and Jeremy rubbed it with his finger to clean it.

Then, he pressed a key at random.

D3L3ND4 appeared on the screen.

Jeremy sat on the ground, breathing deep on the stale air of the underground tunnel. Perhaps the strange code had something to do with the military alphabet used by the US Army. Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, Delta... But what was the relevance of the numbers?

Maybe this was a kind of equation that you had to solve, and the password was the answer. He tried entering some random keystrokes, and on the display the message *ER-ROR!!!* appeared, and then, it reverted to *D3L3ND4*.

In frustration, the boy punched the concrete wall with his fist. Then he tried another combination.

FRROR!!!

D3L3ND4

Jeremy tried to concentrate. The mysterious prompt was seven characters long, but the error message contained a total of eight. So the password could be up to eight characters, any of them a letter or a number. He got to his feet, discouraged: that was almost two thousand billion possible combinations!

He could have tried constructing a password cracker, a program able to sequentially enter all the possible combinations until it found the correct one. But where could he attach it? He could not see any plugs or ports on the box where he could connect a cable. And on top of that, the door was probably protected against such invasion attempts.

It seemed a doomed enterprise.

Jeremy left the factory just before it got dark.

He returned to the Academy and began to ponder the password prompt: he tried different search engines and read books on advanced cryptography, pure mathematics, the theory and practice of secret messages. He searched for the name 'Green Phoenix' on every possible website on the plan-

et. He tried to rearrange the letters, to order them in columns, to add and subtract them.

Nothing. He tried to trace information about the factory, the previous owners, or their reasons for closing it...but, as before, he might have had more luck trying to coax a spider out of its hole. An entire day passed. Then another went by.

Then a third.

And, at last, he arrived at the solution.

Jeremy was running towards Professor Hertz's study to ask to borrow some of her books, when he saw Principal Delmas coming out of his office with a person of uncertain age; with a white cascade of tousled hair and a full beard, the man resembled the missing evolutionary link between a Neanderthal and Father Christmas.

"Thank you Paul," the principal said to him, "That riddle had been driving me mad for weeks!"

"It was quite difficult, to be fair," the other observed, "I was just lucky."

"Nonsense!" the principal insisted "There is no riddle I've seen you fail to solve. You are the President of our Enigmatography Club after all."

Something tripped in Jeremy's brain: maybe this strange person was just the help he needed...

He flattened himself against the column, waited for the headmaster and the mysterious individual to overtake him, and started to follow them.

At the door to the administrative building Principal Delmas said goodbye to his friend, who continued on alone through the grounds. The perfect opportunity.

In a moment Jeremy covered the ground separating them and approached the man.

"Excuse me..." he said timidly.

"Yes young man?" he had eyes so clear they seemed transparent, and a deep, profound voice.

"I, err..." What could he say? That he had eavesdropped on the conversation between him and the principal? That he had casually discovered a military supercomputer and to activate it had to open a secret door in the bowels of an abandoned factory?

"Feel free to speak, my boy..."

"I have a riddle that I can't solve."

The man scratched his chin, thoughtful.

"And you would like a hand?" he murmured, as if torn between himself, "Speaking honestly, I should not really help you. The important thing is not the solution, but how we reach it. If I solve it, you will be denied the experience."

"But you helped Principal Delmas, and I..." Jeremy began, quickly cutting himself off.

His companion burst into sonorous laughter, "So you heard us, did you? Very well then, let's find a bench, where we can make ourselves comfortable while we make sense of your enigma."

After they were seated, Jeremy hurriedly scribbled D3L3ND4

on a sheet of paper and passed it to Paul, who focused his attention on it.

After several seconds, he murmured: "Eight letters."

"Yes!" Jeremy exclaimed incredulously, thinking back to the display in the factory. "How do you know?"

"Perhaps you're a bit too young for this, but generally boys like you are much better with computers than us old fogies. Haven't you ever used 'leet-speak'?"

Jeremy nodded. To be exact, leet or 'l33t' was not a proper language, but a trick used by computer programmers to create complicated but easily remembered passwords: you simply replace some of the letters with numbers or symbols that resembled them. So, for example, *LOVE* became *LOV3*, and *VICTORY* became *V1CTORY*.

In fact, Jeremy had already explored this possibility...

But, if transcribed using the principles of leet, *D3L3ND4* became *DELENDA*. And that word meant absolutely nothing to Jeremy.

"I did consider that," he explained, "but I discarded it because the result is a nonsense word."

"Delenda?" Paul smiled, "I'm sorry to contradict you, but you're not entirely correct. It's actually a Latin word that means 'that which must be destroyed', more or less. And did you know this word was once famously used by someone?"

"No," Jeremy admitted. His strength was in the sciences, not ancient languages.

"Cato the Elder, a politician of Ancient Rome, motivated his peers to declare war on the hostile Carthaginian Empire by concluding all of his addresses to the Senate with the phrase, 'Carthago delenda est!' or rather, 'Carthage must be destroyed!'"

"Eight letters... 'Carthago' has eight letters..." murmured Jeremy, light dawning on his face.

He took Paul's pen from his hand and, on the piece of paper scribbled, in shaky handwriting: *C4RTH4G0*.

"You have my compliments, my young friend."

That was the solution.

Jeremy packed a rucksack with a battery-powered torch and his laptop computer, checked that the corridor was clear and slipped out the door of his room.

Then he thought for a moment and doubled back. From under his bed he pulled out his old collapsible scooter: so that the trip through the sewers would be quicker.

He crossed the grounds of Kadic and lowered himself into the manhole.

When he disembarked the lift that had lowered him into the old factory's first sub-level, he stood in silence for a second and regarded the chair in front of the extinguished screens.

"Soon I'll know if I have the correct solution," he said grandly to himself.



Then he descended down the shaft, the lit torch suspended from a cord looped round his neck. When he reached the deep bottom of the complex he was sweating and his fingers felt like they would never recover from having gripped tightly onto all the metal rungs of the ladder.

Jeremy wiped his forehead using the fabric of his jersey and directed the torch's thin beam of light onto the small door. The same word was still flashing on the display of the security box.

D3L3ND4

The boy took an expectant breath, and then he began to key in the solution. As soon as he entered the θ in *C4RTH4G0*, a new word appeared on the display.

ACCESS!!

...and the lock on the door released with a dry clack.

The door swung half-open and a strong and clear light shone through. Jeremy pulled on the door to open it completely and finally stepped through to the other side.

He had expected a room filled with tens of dark cabinets that reached to the ceiling, an indeterminate number of computers whirring calmly.

But on the contrary, before him he saw only a great cylinder covered in strange dark symbols, more akin to a modern art sculpture. It did not seem to be a computer like any other: it was something completely new, a technology Jeremy had never seen before.

"Goodness knows if this still works," he said, and his voice reverberated through the empty chamber.

There was only one way to be certain. He discovered the master switch at the base of the cylinder, a simple leveractuated relay. After a moment's hesitation, Jeremy pushed it down.

A clear blue spark spat from the relay.

Jeremy returned to the control room to establish if anything had happened.

Breathing deeply he sat in the armchair. His weight triggered a sensor and unexpectedly the monitors lit up, while from the circular pad built into the floor, which the boy had imagined to be a teleporter, rose a cone of green light. It was a kind of projector.

On the monitor rows of characters began to align themselves into a programming language completely alien to Jeremy.

Fascinated, he began to explore the amazing computer and, while his fingers ran across the keyboard, the beams of light from the projector drew a three-dimensional sphere that floated in mid-air: a giant world map, subdivided into four segments. At the core, translucent, a brilliantly white nucleus sparkled.

"A map", he breathed emotionally.

A map divided into four sectors.

Jeremy was now certain that he was in some kind of military base. But the floating sphere did not resemble planet



Earth: he didn't recognise any of the continents. He began working the keyboard, trying to crack the system until somehow he managed to call up name fields over the four sectors.

LYOKO FOREST. LYOKO ICE. LYOKO DESERT. LYOKO MOUNTAINS.

"Lyoko?" Jeremy increased the zoom and the image split into sections. Four gigantic slices of watermelon connected by the unnamed core.

The core was white, while the four sectors had individualised colours.

FOREST.
ICE.
DESERT.
MOUNTAINS.

Jeremy was perspiring, the glasses sliding down his nose and their lenses misting up. His fingers shook as they pressed keys, becoming more and more engaged, issuing unsuccessful commands in an attempt to get to the bottom of this.

ZOOM. ACCESS. CORE: ACCESS.



ENTER PASSCODE. ACCESS DENIED.

Nothing could force it open. He was not getting in. And what of these strange images that represented fantastic continents. Four sectors, and a white core that seemed inaccessible, with no other clues.

ENTER PASSCODE. ACCESS DENIED

Ok, thought Jeremy, let's try one of the sectors.

ZOOM. BACK. BACK. FOREST SECTOR: ACCESS. ENTER PASSCODE. ACCESS DENIED. CONNECTION REQUIRED.

"What 'Connection'?" asked Jeremy, grinding his teeth in frustration "What could you connect to?"

Other text began to whirl onto the screen.

ACTIVE SCANNING.

SEARCHING FOR HUMAN AGENT...

SEARCH COMPLETE. HUMAN AGENT LOCATED.

TOWER 3: FOREST SECTOR: ESTABLISH CONNECTION?

Jeremy could not understand any of this. Now the screen was focusing on a region that had to be the 'Forest Sector'. In



one corner of it a little red dot was flashing.

ESTABLISH CONNECTION?

Damn it, what did this mean? Was the little red dot the human agent?

Calm down! Jeremy told himself, forcing himself to breathe.

The gigantic supercomputer, hidden in the heart of this abandoned factory, now seemed to be running an extremely elaborate videogame. Maybe it was one of those online role-playing games which allowed people to log in and play from anywhere in the world. Perhaps all it meant was this: the 'human agent' was another player...who was in the Forest Sector.

In Tower 3. On Lyoko.

Whatever that meant.

Jeremy remained immobile. If he had really reactivated an old video game, then why had it been turned off in the first place? And why was it in a place like this? An old factory.

Older than the technology hidden in it...

He began to feel afraid. Entering had been all too easy. As if someone had wanted him to enter. But who?

"This isn't a game," he whispered, gritting his teeth, "Virtual Reality, yes. But not something for playing on." In that case the little red dot, the 'human agent', could be anything. Possibly even something dangerous.



Perhaps the best course of action would be to turn everything back off.

And then walk away. Forget. And finally finish his science project.

But Jeremy knew he could not. He was sitting here, before an impossible computer. And he had to discover what purpose it served.

He had to know more.

PRESS 'Y' TO CONNECT TO AGENT

"Here we go," Jeremy said aloud to bolster his resolve, "Let's connect."

His finger stabbed the 'Y' key. The screen abruptly went to black, and then something moved.

Jeremy closed his eyes in an instant of terror. When he reopened them, he was looking at the face of a girl. Her helmet-like hair was a strange, intense pink and fell in a long fringe across her forehead, broken at the sides of her face by two strangely pointed ears, like those of an elf.

Her delicate features were emphasised by exotic makeup: two vertical stripes, the same colour as her hair, that followed the soft curves of her cheeks. From her half-closed mouth there came the sound of the calm breathing of someone who was deeply asleep.

"She's...beautiful," said Jeremy in a low voice, deeply affected



At that instant, the young elf-girl opened her eyes. They were large and brilliant, the colour of forest foliage. She looked around herself, disorientated. Behind her was a black wall, on which numbers and senseless symbols flowed, like leaves blown in the wind.

"Where...am I?" she asked eventually. Then she seemed to look straight at Jeremy. "And who...who are you?"

Jeremy jumped back into his chair, "You mean me? But that means...you can see me?"

Though Jeremy could not see them, he now realised that there had to be a hidden webcam, microphone and loudspeaker array built into the console.

But what was happening? However hard he tried, he could not think lucidly.

"Aren't you...that is, well...in short...what are you?" he stammered in confusion.

"I don't know what I am. But what are you?" replied the elf.

"I am...I am a boy."

"Well, then I am a girl. I think."

Jeremy was still not willing to believe his eyes.

"Could you tell me how I wound up in...here?"

Jeremy didn't know how to respond to that.

"Don't you...remember anything?"

The girl creased her eyes and looked around herself again. She seemed frightened, and then she shook her head disconsolately.



"What were you doing before this?" Jeremy said, attempting to jog her memory through persistence.

"I was sleeping."

"Sleeping? For how long?"

"I don't know," replied the girl, sounding more and more confused.

There was an uncomfortable silence, and Jeremy decided to introduce himself: "My name is J-Jeremy."

"Jeremy, it's a beautiful name. I like it."

For the first time the girl smiled faintly. Then her face darkened again. "I don't remember if I even have a name."

"Well let's choose one," Jeremy proposed, "If you don't know your name, how about I decide on one for you. What do you think of...Maya?"

The girl squinted her eyes, in a way that Jeremy found absolutely irresistible. "Maya," she repeated, "I like it! Maya and Jeremy. So are we friends now?"

Jeremy thought this was all very strange.

But he answered without any hesitation: "Of course. You and Lare friends."

5

MAYA'S SLEEP

(CITY OF THE IRON TOWER, FRANCE, SOME TIME AGO)

When Jeremy had led Ulrich into the old factory, he'd taken him down to the second underground level, the room with the three columns.

"So what's the deal with these things?" asked Ulrich.

"I have no idea."

They approached the first of the metal doors, and it opened with a buzzing hum. On the inside was a brightly-lit cabin.

Curious, Ulrich slipped his head through the doorway.

"Don't enter it!" cautioned Jeremy from behind.

"Why?"

Jeremy sighed, "I fear it might be dangerous. I've discussed this with Maya."

♦ MAYA'S SLEEP ♦

"That friend of yours right, the one playing the role of 'Digital Sleeping Beauty'? How is she related to all of this?"

"That's my point. I don't know. And it seems she herself doesn't know either."

Ulrich scratched his head, "You told me you saw she was surrounded by woods, right?"

"Yes. It's a sector of an entire world...a virtual world."

"So when she talks to you, what does she see?"

"She sees me here, in the factory."

"So she sees you in the real world and you see her in this virtual world."

"Correct."

"And how do you two communicate?"

"Her voice is projected by loudspeakers. And my voice...I'm not sure. When I speak she says she can feel it resounding all around her."

"Wow, cool."

"Yes. It's as if this place controls an entire virtual world. And she's within it."

"Then your friend...she's part of this virtual world?"

"I'm not convinced of that."

"Why?"

Jeremy paused momentarily before answering. "It's difficult to explain" he said at last. "When I first talked to her, I supposed that I was talking to a virtual creature, a kind of incredibly advanced artificial intelligence. She couldn't answer even rudimentary questions about our world, as if she

knew nothing of it. She didn't even know her own name. But in spite of that, there's something, in her words, her voice...it's indefinable but terribly...human. Because of that, I'm becoming convinced that what I was looking at was a real girl. Flesh and blood."

"Sorry to be a bummer Jeremy, but she's in a computer full of virtual things! Come on, she can't be...'real'! Hasn't an alternative occurred to you?"

"I've subjected her to the Turing test."

Ulrich rolled his eyes "You've subjected her to the *what?*" Jeremy sighed, giving up in the face of such ignorance.

"Alan Turing was a British mathematician" he began to explain. "He helped create the field of Computer Science. Amongst other things, he developed an experiment to determine whether something that appeared human was indeed that or just a machine."

"Um. I think I saw something like that in an old film with Harrison Ford. There was this robot only it didn't know that it was a robot..." Ulrich commented, scratching his head.

Jeremy cut him off suddenly "Look, I subjected her to the test. And it came back with a positive result. So what I'm left asking myself is this: if Maya's a real person who's woken up to discover that she's inside a supercomputer, how the heck did she get there?" As he finished the sentence, he leant against one of the sliding luminous doors, which opened with a soft rustling.

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"Wait a second!" exclaimed Ulrich, having watched the little scene. "Something tells me you've already figured out the answer."

"Well, these columns might be the entrance."

The door to the cabin closed again. The three columns had now taken on a new, disturbing aspect. Jeremy indicated towards the cables and equipment that from the summit of the columns disappeared into the ceiling.

"I know it sounds absurd, Ulrich...but I believe that these things are some kind of scanners. Like a biological threedimensional photocopier."

"Interesting" commented Ulrich, with an ironic tint. "But would it hurt you to explain it in words we humans can understand?"

"In layman's terms" Jeremy explained patiently, "these three columns act as teleporters to the virtual world in which Maya lives."

Ulrich sniggered, "Science fiction."

"That was my reaction as well."

"You mean to say that the second you go in here you come out...but on the other side?"

Jeremy nodded, serious, "Exactly."

"Pardon me, but how did you come to that understanding?"

"I don't understand anything, not really. But look way down here, do you see? There's a plate mounted on the column, and look at what's written on it."

"Scanner. Virtualisation Chamber. Caution. Wow!"

"I don't see the word 'wow!' written there."

"I know, I was just...oh forget it!"

"Ulrich, the Turing test is not one hundred percent infallible, and Maya must just be an artificially intelligent program so advanced as to be able to perfectly simulate a human personality. But if that isn't the case, then we've got to find a way to pull her back out."

"Have you asked her if she remembers something like these...'Virtualisation Chambers'?"

"She doesn't remember anything of the scanners, and she doesn't know how long she's been inside there. She says she was sleeping."

At that instant Ulrich suddenly felt cold. Exploring the old factory together with his new friend had been amusing. But now alarm bells in his head were warning that he had been thrust into something dangerous. Something very dangerous.

"Well, what do you have in mind?" he asked eventually.

Jeremy arranged his glasses on his nose. "It seems obvious to me. I want to see if my theory is correct and if these devices really do what I believe them to. And so we arrive at my motivation for your presence here."

"You want to use me as a guinea-pig?"

"Well deduced."

Ulrich grinned, while an idea slowly took root in his mind. "Your logic is undeniable. But I don't think I'm quite ready to

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get in that machine, dear heart. But I do like the idea of a guinea-pig..."

Smiling strangely, Ulrich looked him in the eyes. Have you heard of a certain Odd Della Robbia?"

"Isn't he your roommate? The one who always flirts with the girls?"

"That's him. What do you make of him?"

"Meh. He seems a bit strange to me."

"Then you should see his dog."

Posted near every entrance to the Kadic dormitories was a long list of rules that students were expected to respect. For example: AFTER DINNER IT IS FORBIDDEN TO LEAVE THE DORMITORIES UNACCOMPANIED BY A TEACHER. Or: AFTER TEN DO NOT DISTURB OTHER STUDENTS WITH EXCESSIVE NOISE. More or less halfway down the list, written in large red doubled-sized characters, it was possible to read: PET ANIMALS ARE FORBIDDEN ON KADIC ACADEMY GROUNDS, INCLUDING GOLDFISH AND SMALL CAGED ANIMALS (HAMSTERS, CANARIES, ETC). STUDENTS CONTRAVENING THIS RULE RISK A ONE- TO THREE-DAY SUSPENSION AND, IN SEVERE CASES, EXPULSION FROM THE SCHOOL.

Ulrich had no pets.

Odd Della Robbia did. When he had arrived as Ulrich's new roommate he had brought with him Kiwi, a small and horrible hairless dog, with pointed ears and a muzzle that was all mouth and teeth. To keep it hidden Odd was using

the most absurd techniques, shutting the animal in the closet, under the bed, in his rucksack (to be taken outside to perform his ablutions). After the first two days of co-habitation, Ulrich had decided that Kiwi was the most hateful mongrel that he had ever met: if at night it felt lonely, it whimpered incessantly. If the moon was out, it yipped and barked. And during the day he loved to hide in the boys' drawers, dribbling and nibbling on their clothes. Ulrich had found his *kekogi*, his martial arts uniform, torn to shreds, and his favourite pair of gym shoes had literally been devoured.

When he'd shown them to Odd, his apology was limited to a shrug of the shoulders: "He's always been fond of stinky things."

That evening, after returning from the old factory, Ulrich entered his room as if nothing had happened. He'd have to wait until night fell, and then...he could procure the guineapig that Jeremy needed!

He lay in bed completely dressed and pretending to sleep, until he perceived that Odd's breathing in the opposite bed had become deep and regular. Kiwi had curled up on his young master's shoes and was whining quietly.

Ulrich checked his watch: it was past midnight. He and Jeremy had agreed to meet at the manhole towards one o'clock. By that hour Jim Morales, the gymnastics teacher who had also assumed the role of dormitory supervisor, had

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usually begun to snore heavily. He'd wait a few more seconds and then...mission green-lighted!

Trying not to make any noise, the boy slipped from the covers.

"Now you're mine, you little monster!" he whispered. He seized Kiwi, pressing the dog to his chest to ensure it didn't start barking.

And then he slipped out of the room. As he opened the door a blade of light cut across the floor. Then it swung shut with a soft clack. Odd Della Robbia opened his eyes with the unpleasant sensation that something was out of place.

A moment's thought...that was definitely it. Kiwi's habitual snoring had stopped. Odd shot up into a sitting position, worried. Ulrich's bed was empty. And Kiwi was gone. "Come here boy" he called.

Nothing.

He tried whistling for the dog. No response.

In two seconds Odd had slipped a jacket over his pyjamas and flew out of the room. He heard the sound of retreating footsteps coming from the stairs.

And another sound...that was Kiwi barking!

"Hey! But that means..."

The dormitory entrance door was open and Odd went through it without slowing down. He emerged running into the cool evening air.

Ulrich's shape was disappearing between the trees in the grounds. Why had Ulrich taken his dog? A series of disturb-

ing hypotheses began to cross his mind, but he drove them away: his new roommate might have a reserved temperament, but deep down he seemed a decent guy. He would certainly not do anything evil to Kiwi. Even after the treacherous consumption of his shoes!

Odd stopped at a break in the trees to catch his breath. Around him the open grass was rustling, caressed by the shadows of the night. He glanced around in search of his roommate, who seemed to have disappeared into nothingness. Then he noticed a half-opened manhole cover set in the ground. He ventured nearer and shifted it away: a black well disappeared into the depths. The boy inserted his head, but withdrew it immediately, disgusted at the stink that was rising up through the duct.

Wait a second...he had definitely heard the sound of footsteps in water: so Ulrich had gone down belowground. And if Ulrich had made it down, then so could he.

After he'd plugged his nose, obviously.

"So cute!" exclaimed Maya from inside the computer, while Ulrich held Kiwi up in front of her.

"But how exactly...do you see us?" asked the boy, his curiosity evident.

The girl smiled. "A window appears floating in mid-air in front of me. And you're on the inside."



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"Wow, weird!" Ulrich exclaimed, observing her on the screen of the control room. "It's like some kind of videoconference."

Jeremy was operating the computer, his attitude professional: "I'd rather say it's a sophisticated user interface for a virtual reality world exploiting webcams, microphones and goodness knows what else. In any case... Maya, soon you'll be able to meet Kiwi in person. I've found a virtualisation application on the computer that should do the job. I'm about ninety-eight percent sure this will work perfectly. So we'll send the dog to you, then we'll try to bring it back, and once we've verified that it's healthy and unharmed...we will try to enter as well...or attempt to pull you out...

"Don't get too ahead of yourself," Ulrich whispered to him. "Take it one step at a time. So let's start with making the little monster disappear..."

A strange light had ignited in the girl's eyes. "You are certain of what you're doing Jeremy, right?"

"Of course, that is, well no...but...you mustn't worry" Jeremy tried to reassure her. "It's only a test, and perhaps it won't be of any use to us first time round: this supercomputer is terribly complicated."

"And perhaps, tragically, in the course of the experiment Kiwi could be lost to us forever..." sneered Ulrich from beside him.

Jeremy threw a glare at him. "You better go below. Put Kiwi in one of the scanners, close the door and get back up here. I'll wait for you to return before I begin the countdown."

As Ulrich rode down the lift, the dog licked his face, happy at anything. "You can't imagine how displeased I am at you to have to get rid of you like this, you little monster."

Five minutes later, Ulrich had returned.

"All clear."

"Ok" nodded Jeremy. "Maya, get ready. You must be ready to report anything that happens on your side. Commencing countdown: fifty seconds, forty-nine..."

"What was that?" asked Ulrich suddenly.

"What was what?"

"I heard a noise. As if someone was using the lift!"

"You better go check on it."

Ulrich glanced towards the countdown that was proceeding relentlessly. "Later" he murmured.

When Odd arrived in the scanner chamber he was finally convinced that he was in some kind of a dream. Or a night-mare. In short, completely divorced from reality.

He could overlook the sewers and the iron bridge, and even the abandoned factory and the creaking lift. But the room in which he was now standing, with its strange ultratechnological showers and all the lights, was something too incredible to be believed.

"Weird" he breathed, his eyes opened wide.



In response he heard a weak bark. It was quiet and muffled.

"Kiwi!" Odd cried out "where've you hidden yourself? Come here boy!"

The dog began to bark frantically and started scraping from the inside of one of the strange columns. Odd approached it running and skimmed one of the walls, which slid open by itself.

"Three...Two..."

Kiwi leapt out like a bullet and struck Odd full-on in the stomach, causing him to lose his balance.

"Hey, calm down..." he said, leaning against the cabin door to prevent himself falling. That was his key mistake. Kiwi launched himself between his master's legs, causing him to stumble, and at that point the sliding door began to move again. Scrabbling for a handhold that wasn't there, Odd tipped into the column, the door shutting and sealing itself behind him.

"One... Zero! Virtualisation!"

The light inside the cabin became a blinding flash that struck him like a blow.

Odd felt himself begin to rise, pushed upwards by strong jets of air that buffeted at the hairs on his head. He squeezed his

eyes shut. His skin was itching, and the hairs on his arms were standing on end and then...

...he plunged down and landed like a cat, reflexively springing onto his hands and feet to mitigate the impact.

This was insane.

And now where was he?

The images his eyes perceived had the unreal shapes and colours of a video game's 3D graphics engine. There were trees that reached so high that their tips were lost in the sky. It was light and bright, even though there was no sign of the solar disc. And the ground was covered in colourful weft, varying from chestnut brown to the colour of sand. There did not seem to be a horizon and instead the landscape around him just vanished into the distance, aseptic and deserted.

Odd swallowed.

Ok, it now looked as if he had ended up inside a video game.

The virtual sensations were so strange and strong at the same time that Odd instinctively tried to block them out by covering his eyes with his hands.

An instant later he withdrew them, fearful. These were not his hands!

Now he inspected himself with greater attention. He was no longer dressed in his pyjamas and the jacket, but a set of some kind of violet overalls. His hands were wrapped in gloves that had claws on the ends of the fingertips. Like the landscape his body was 'unreal', and from the small of his

back there now sprouted a tail that swayed from side to side. And the most incredible thing was that he could feel it: he could perceive its soft fur testing the air.

He probed his face, perplexed. That had remained normal, but his hair on his head was now spiked straight up like that of a punk, and over his forehead he could feel two soft growths similar to furred ears.

"Hey, have I become some kind of...supercat?!"

"Odd?" a voice drew his attention.

The boy turned, trying to perceive who had spoken to him, but saw nobody. It seemed as if the voice was coming from directly inside his ear, as if someone had implanted an earphone in him.

"Oh please no!" the voice exclaimed, annoyed. "How can you possibly be in there Odd??"

With a certain degree of surprise, Odd recognised the speaker as Jeremie Belpois, the class megaswot. "Jeremy? Is that you?"

"Yes! It's me!"

"Where...how are you hearing me?"

"Do any of us understand this? But I'm receiving you loud and clear, and I can even see you on my monitors."

"Odd?" a second voice introduced itself, this one more familiar.

"Ulrich! Do you know the trouble you've thrown me into?"

Ulrich's voice sounded incredulous. "Let me make it clear that it's your own stupid fault that you're down there instead of that flea-bitten mongrel of yours!"

"Hey, guys, am I missing something here? Can anyone explain to me what this place is meant to be? Because I'm getting the vibe that it's not quite...'normal'."

There was silence.

And then, Jeremy's voice confirmed it. "That's about the sum of it, Odd. You're in a virtual world that's running off a...erm...a quantum supercomputer."

"Quan-what? Let me guess, this is a joke, right? Can you show me the trick behind it?"

"The cabin that you entered (and which Kiwi should have been occupying) was a virtualisation scanner, a bio three-dime..."

"Hey, hey, hey!" Odd burst out, slowly beginning to lose his patience. "Pardon me for interrupting, buddy, but can you please explain how I got... this?"

"Wow!" Ulrich interrupted in excitement. "He's got a tail!"

"Ehm...maybe..." Jeremy stammered. "Possibly the avatar
that materialises in the real world does not correspond com-

that materialises in the real world does not correspond completely with your real body, but is cross-referenced with your self-perception and...Oh damn, but that would imply." Jeremy snorted. "Perhaps you always subconsciously wanted to be a cat and the computer has simply made you look like one."

"A cat..." repeated Odd thoughtfully, looking over himself.



- "So where am I now?"
- "On Lyoko."
- "Lyoko?"
- "To be precise...you're in the Forest Sector of Lyoko."
- "And is there anyone else, aside from me, inhabiting this dump?"
 - "There is a girl. Maya."
 - "Is she pretty?"
 - "She's not your type. She has elf ears."
- "So aside from me and the elf girl, there isn't a small army of little monsters that resemble armoured mushrooms and which move around en masse?"
 - "Erm no, I've not seen anything like that."
- "Then they must have arrived while we were housekeeping because they're right in front of me!"

In the factory Jeremy battered the keys furiously, manoeuvring the framing with which he monitored Odd's movements.

"There they are!" exclaimed Ulrich, more fascinated than frightened.

They were moving through the woods in a compact phalanx, scuttling along in a manner akin to the horrid scampering of insects. To look at, they resembled large warty cockroaches.

As soon as they noticed Odd's presence, they began firing on him with long laser beams. For a moment, the cat-boy remained paralysed with terror.

Then the impulse to run overtook him and he leapt backwards. And what a leap! He shot into the air like an arrow loosed from its bow and did a mid-air somersault. He landed on the branch of a tree and continued onwards. Odd had never felt this agile and he was manoeuvring effortlessly in the strange atmosphere.

"Have you seen this? I'm a living Ferrari!" he exclaimed in amazement. "Hey, you guys outside, are you still there?"

"Yes!" Jeremy's voice answered.

"How did you make that jump?" Ulrich asked incredulously, slightly envious.

"It's easy. Look!"

Odd spread his wings in another bound. But during this flight something struck him in the shoulder. "Ah! What was that?"

"A laser!"

It could have been a video game, but the pain was very real. And it was burning. Really and truly burning.

"Odd" informed Jeremy. "You got hit!"

"Well, thanks for telling me! It stings like a bitch!"

"A status display's appeared on the monitor: it's telling me you've lost thirty...thirty of something..."

"Like thirty life points" added Ulrich.



"Then that means I really am in a video game, guys! And how many of these do I have left, these life points?"

"You've got seventy remaining, and then..."

"Then?"

"Game Over."

"So then...what happens to me?"

"I have no idea."

Instinctively Odd began to run faster. "Oh, that's just grand! Just fantastic! So what do I do now?" he screamed, darting between the trees.

He had to wait for Jeremy's voice to reply. "You should see something like a white tower in front of you."

"I see it!"

"Great. That's Tower 3. It's right on the edge of the forest sector."

"And that means?"

"That's where Maya is. If you can reach it, you should be safe."

Odd turned, frightened: behind him the cockroaches were catching up. Here the forest opened out into an open expanse set with shrubs, which stirred in a virtual wind.

"Don't go that way!" an unfamiliar voice called out to him. "The tower's no longer secure!"

Wham! Laser beam! Odd dodged it and took a moment to check around himself. Several steps to one side he could see a girl, not particularly tall, with pointed ear tips and a bob of

comically pink hair. She was squatting between some of the bushes.

"You're Maya?"

"Yes. Come with me, quickly!"

Odd swung around and began to race after her, asking no questions.

The umpteenth laser beam whistled overhead, shattering a rock into a thousand fragments.

"Jeremy! These things mean serious business! Please tell me you've had a brilliant idea as to how to pull us out of here?" Odd shrilled.

"No! What I'm seeing on my screen is totally incomprehensible! But, there is another tower...not too far from you."

"Great, how do we get there?"

"Go straight for now, and I'll tell you when to turn. The computer is...yes, it's showing me a map of the sector you're in."

"Argh! They got me!" Odd yelled, rolling along the ground in a cloud of dust. "They're evil!"

Maya helped him pick himself up. "Which way now Jeremy?" she asked anxiously.

"To your right! The tower is...it's beginning to flash. It's flashing red..."

"I'm ok, let's go!" Odd whistled between his teeth, shaking his cat tail.



Then he heard Ulrich's voice resounding around him. "Jeremy, I can't just stand here and watch. I'm going down to the scanners."

When Ulrich arrived in the room with the three columns his heart was clocking a thousand miles a minute. Remorse and anxiety were churning in his gut. It was his fault that Odd was in this ugly situation, and he intended to do something about it as soon as possible. He had been a martial arts practitioner since the age of five; the prospect of facing off those disgusting cockroaches did not bother him in the slightest.

"Be quiet, you stupid dog!" he hissed at Kiwi who was running around the room barking.

The scanner that Odd had entered was sealed shut. So Ulrich hurled himself into the next one along. He waited. Then he began to tap at a keypad that he found mounted on an inside wall.

"Jeremy, do you read me?" he asked.

"Loud and clear" his friend confirmed through a loudspeaker.

"I'm good to go."

"Get ready, ok... Virtualisation."

Ulrich was assaulted by the blinding light and drawn upwards, until suspended as if in an air tunnel. And a few moments later, he was on the other side.

On Lyoko...

To be here in person was very different from looking at it through the screens of the control room. His eyes struggled to adapt to the virtual world's flat and simplistic characteristics. The leaves on the trees swayed under the weight of an invisible wind, but they were perfectly synchronised, moving together in an almost mechanical fashion. When the grass bent beneath his feet there was a fraction of a second's delay.

It was not real. It did not truly exist.

Ulrich remained immobile for a few seconds, disorientated. He was perceiving everything in a different way, even if he could not define how. It was like being underwater, or wrapped in a thin layer of film that impeded his movements.

And he had changed clothes: he was attired in a samurai kimono and on his feet was wearing string sandals over long white socks. Affixed to his belt was a katana, a classical Japanese sword.

"Incredible" he breathed, assessing the blade.

"Ulrich?"

"Your theory's correct Jeremy. Anyone transported here assumes a form that reflects their inner nature." And Ulrich's inner nature, judging from this, was that of a samurai.

He tried to orientate himself in the dense vegetation of the tall trees.

"Where are the others?"

But he didn't need to hear the answer: a high-pitched scream cut through the air off to his left.



"Maya!" he heard Jeremy's voice echo, clear and forcefully inside his ear. "Maya's been hit! Except...the computer isn't deducting any life points! I don't know what that means, but please take care!"

It means she isn't real, Ulrich thought to himself. But he didn't say it aloud.

Two giant leaps later he caught up with them: the elfin girl was running flat-out, while Odd vaulted from one branch to the next and tried to draw the enemy's fire.

Ulrich, however, took the direct opposite approach: he unsheathed his weapon and launched himself straight at the first cockroach. Dodging a laser-blast he struck the robotic insect, swinging the katana against its carapace. It was like punching an anvil.

Ulrich hit the ground rolling, recovered his footing and checked to confirm that the impact had not shattered the sword. That done he swung round and locked his eyes on the enemy.

"Go ahead, make my day."

The monster had neither eyes, nor a mouth. It was just a carapace with a mass of dark, tentacle-like limbs.

Ulrich evaded a lunge by those tentacles. As it made contact a shower of sparks cascaded from his katana.

Jumping and moving in this virtual world was an odd experience for him. It was all so...unreal! He would have found the lack of sensation uncomfortable, if he had the time to consider it.

He noticed that in the exact centre of the cockroach's carapace was a strange black double-circle.

Like some kind of a target.

Or an eye.

Not pausing to reflect on this, Ulrich launched himself into a jump, landed with a somersault over the monster and drove the katana into the exact centre of the unknown symbol. The cockroach exploded in a rain of bright fragments.

"Yes! I got one!" he crowed exultantly.

"Hey, that's not fair!" complained Odd, from a branch above him. "Just because you got a sword and I got this stupid tail!"

While he was gesticulating wildly Odd unintentionally cocked back one of his arms and from the wrist there shot a small dart which embedded itself in a log several metres away.

"Awesome! They're like little laser-propelled arrows!" whooped Odd. "My hands fire laser arrows!"

He plunged down to land beside his friend. The cockroaches slowly pressed in and encircled the two back-to-back boys, two against one.

"Do you see that kind of spot that they all have on their armour?" asked Ulrich.

"Yeah."

"If you hit them there, they disintegrate."

"And what if we get disintegrated instead?"



The two roommates glanced at one another. The whole situation was so insane that neither of them felt particularly afraid.

"You know Odd, I guess I kind of owe you an apology for kidnapping Kiwi..."

"And for getting me trapped in a virtual world where I'm a giant purple cat, you look like the waiter from a sushi bar and where big robot cockroaches are trying to kill us before we can hide from them in a sparkly tower?"

"Well, that as well."

"You owe me nothing man" Odd replied, smiling honestly. "I love this!"

And then he leapt off, hurling himself onto the nearest monster. Aiming his arm he screamed: "Laser arrow!"

Maya was running at breakneck speed, her eyes fixed on the white tower coming into view a short distance ahead of her, partly hidden in the trees.

The structure resembled a giant candle, the walls smooth and uniform, but emanating from it was a threatening halo of red light.

The closer she came to it, the more she felt the impression of a negative energy spreading in the air.

And it was not the first time that she had sensed this strange presence.

Fragments of memory began to surface in her mind. It was a signal to the monsters, calling them here. An alarm klaxon.

Maya knew this instinctively. And she also knew that there was something terrible behind the signal. As she ran, she suddenly began to remember. To remember why. And who.

"Jeremy!" she cried. "I've just recalled something important!"

"Tell me everything!"

"I know who's calling the monsters!"

"Who is it?"

"X.A.N.A.!"

"X.A.N.A.?"

"It's the name of this world's ruler! It's X.A.N.A. who controls Lyoko! And he hates me! He hates all of us!"

"He hates us? Why?"

"I don't remember...all I know is that he's insane! And the monsters are in his service! Can't you hear the sound?"

"What sound?"

"It's a call to the monsters, coming from the tower! And the tower is flashing because...because it's been infected! X.A.N.A. has infected it!"

Like a virus, Jeremy realised with a shiver.

"But why is he attacking us?"

"What kind of a question is that? Doesn't a missile destroy anything in its path?" Then, another fragment of her memory slotted into place. "He doesn't want me to enter the tower..."

"Why?" Jeremy asked again.

"Because I..." Maya answered, almost trance-like. "Because I can purge him; I can...treat the infection."



Jeremy was so struck by that revelation that he didn't say anything.

"And there's a symbol..." Maya continued, after a moment's silence. "An eye... Yes! The Eye of X.A.N.A.! You've got to tell the boys to hit it! It's an imprint he leaves on his monsters, but it's also their weak spot!"

Jeremy smiled. "Don't worry; they already worked that one out by themselves."

As she reached the base of the flashing tower, Maya heard a mechanical buzzing and stopped abruptly. Right in front of her appeared something roughly the shape of a giant crab, standing at least two metres high, with repugnant legs and a dark and swollen head.

She threw herself to the ground as a ray shot from its pincer and tore a black scar into a tree trunk behind her.

Then she was back on her feet, and started running again with her heart jumping into her throat. She was frightened to death!

"Jeremy! It's following me!" she cried despairingly.

He quickly consulted his monitor. Three, four, five dots had suddenly appeared on the map.

"There are more of them, and they're right on your heels. Don't stop running!"

I can't give up. I'm the cure. The only cure! I know how to stop this. And X.A.N.A.'s afraid. Afraid of me.

There was another terrible buzzing. This time the land beneath Maya's feet tipped upwards, and she rolled to one side. Recovering she started to run again. But it was too late.

The giant crab was almost on top of her. Then she saw movement, and two figures dropped down behind her. Odd and Ulrich.

"Get away!" Ulrich yelled.

"If you want her you'll have to go through me, you overgrown appetiser!"

The crab obliged him.

Wham!

Odd took a direct hit and decompiled into nothingness. As if he had never existed. Ulrich fell to his knees at the sight, dazed. "Jeremy...is...is he dead?"

Silence.

Then Jeremy's voice resounded around them again, strong and clear.

"Definitely not! He's just exited one of the columns in the scanner room. He doesn't look like he's in the best of shape, but alive...yes he's still alive!"

"Hardly 'Game Over' then."

The crab reared back and then struck the ground with its pincers, opening up a chasm.

"Not for us, from what I can see. But...Maya doesn't have those life points!"



Ulrich looked towards the girl with the pointed ears, who was still running towards the illuminated tower. "So we can't let them hit her..."

"She's special, Ulrich."

"How? What's she going to do in the tower?"

"I honestly don't know."

She is the cure, he thought to himself, but he had to wait to understand how.

The elfin girl tried not to think of the monstrous army pursuing her. She tried to ignore the sibilant hiss of Ulrich's katana as he struck it against their armour. While her calf muscles cried out in fatigue she kept on running her desperate race, almost ready to burst out into tears, one step after another, climbing the slope, closer and closer to the ever-nearer glowing tower.

Tears.

A computer program does not cry in fear.

A computer program does not run for its life. It has no selfpreservation instinct.

The tower was only a few steps ahead of her. So close.

Now she could almost touch it. Still running, she threw herself into it.

She passed straight through the white walls like she would a wall of smoke. She was inside. Inside the tower.

There was a lonely, absolute silence. The sounds of battle raging outside had been completely cancelled out. As if they were never there to begin with.

The inside walls of the tower were darkened surfaces on which strange white symbols scrolled and flowed. On the floor, in the centre, was a familiar symbol: two concentric circles, three small bars.

The Eye of X.A.N.A.

It shone with an eerie azure luminescence.

"Jeremy?" she called out.

Nothing. Ulrich and the monsters were still outside. It seemed that they could not enter inside the tower.

"But, then...how did I?"

"You just passed...through the wall" Jeremy cleared his throat. "In computer science terms, it could be described as the tower's firewall recognising you and..."

"Cut it short, Einstein!" he was interrupted by Odd, who in the meantime had returned to the control room.

The girl glanced around her surroundings, uncertain of what to do next. Trembling she approached the eye on the floor.

As soon as she touched it, an invisible force delicately lifted her off into the air. It pushed her upwards towards a high and unseen ceiling, until she came to a halt before a simple rectangle, almost transparent and floating unsupported a few centimetres in front of her.

It was a display.



Maya rested her hand against it.

On the screen a single word appeared.

AELITA

She shut her eyes and moved her hands quickly, as if guiding an unseen force, and as if she had repeated this gesture a million times. Then she reopened her eyes to see what she had written.

CODE LYOKO

There was a sense of suction, like the pull of a whirlpool. It felt as if some kind of energy was disappearing, having been cancelled out.

"Tower deactivated" a mechanical voice finally announced, rumbling around her.

Then the tower came to life, the symbols on the wall becoming a cascading fall of letters and numbers.

"I did it!" she exulted.

Jeremy's voice now trembled with emotion: "The monsters...they've disappeared!"

Inside the tower, the girl smiled.

"That's all there is to it."

"But what does 'Code Lyoko' mean?"

"Jeremy, it's the cure! And now I'm remembering other things as well..."



"Such as?"

"X.A.N.A. is not the ruler of this world. I am!"

"You...?"

"Yes, don't you see? And my name's not Maya. I'm called...Aelita."

6

I'M NOT HUMAN

(CITY OF THE IRON TOWER, FRANCE, SOME TIME AGO)

Time. They needed more time.

More time to understand who or what X.A.N.A. was. And to understand who or what Aelita was.

The boys returned to their everyday lives, and to their usual term-time activities: lessons, homework, avoiding all the stupid little social cliques... But, at every opportune moment, they would meet in private, discuss the great secret of Aelita and X.A.N.A. and how they related to Lyoko, the strange virtual world that they were gradually getting to know, and yet which still seemed shrouded in so much shadow.

The way Jeremy had attempted to clarify the situation was that X.A.N.A. was some kind of insane computer virus and that Aelita was his natural antivirus. But that was not enough to explain everything.

To tell the truth it barely explained anything.

What were the towers? Why were there so many of them scattered across the four sectors? And what of the surge in inexplicable electronic phenomena that seemed to correlate with the reactivation of the supercomputer? Light bulbs that exploded without warning, stereos and printers that came on by themselves, televisions that emitted spurting blue flashes before burning out as lifeless husks. Was there a connection between these events and Lyoko, or were the three of them simply becoming paranoid?

Time.

They needed more time.

And maybe, in the course of time...

Jeremy lifted his head from the supercomputer's control console, eyes ringed with black, his attention diverted away from this train of thought.

"And who is she?" he reproachfully asked of Ulrich, indicating towards a girl who was standing next to him. She was slowly taking in the room around her, eyes wide in astonishment. In truth Jeremy had already recognised the girl, at least in appearance. He knew that her name was Yumi Ishiyama, and that she was one academic year ahead of them.

His friend glanced downwards and blushed slightly. "Well, you, see...she followed me here. I found her nosing around downstairs..."

♦ I'M NOT HUMAN ♦

"...in the scanner room" the girl finished his sentence for him.

Ulrich had the good grace to look embarrassed, while Yumi seemed militant.

Jeremy grunted in annoyance. "So you've told her everything, right?"

"I've not told her anything at all!"

"And so she happened to just show up here then?"

"Men!" exclaimed Yumi. "Since when did any of you know how to keep a secret? Come on, I want to have a chance inside this Lyoko place as well!"

"It's dangerous."

"Do I look like I'm afraid?"

"And it's not really a place for a girl" Jeremy grumbled, feeling exhausted.

Yumi indicated towards the computer screens. "Oh really? Ulrich told me there was already a girl inside it!"

Jeremy directed a withering glare at his friend.

"Well, perhaps I did tell her a little bit Jeremy, but..."

"That poor girl is probably sick of only having three little boys for company!" Yumi continued. "I'm guessing she'd enjoy having another girl around to confide in."

"Give her a chance Jeremy!" intervened Ulrich. "She's more than just 'a girl'! Yumi's as good a martial artist as any guy I've seen. Put it this way: if I'm a samurai, then she's worth two of me."

Yumi shot a glance at him that had the intensity of a lightning bolt. But Jeremy was no longer paying attention. Instead he was considering that the sudden appearance of Yumi, rather than an unfortunate accident, could be considered a timely opportunity. Perhaps she was right. Maybe the virtual girl would find it easier to relate to someone of the same gender. Maybe, despite the fact that he and Aelita were becoming wonderfully attuned to the other's moods and needs.

Jeremy nodded his assent, if a little brusquely. "If you really care about it that much, then you'd better get ready."

The scanner closed around Yumi in a tight embrace, then there was a sudden light, and a gust of hot air that seemed to come from all around her blew her hair skywards. Yumi found herself 'materialising' onto Lyoko wearing a traditional kimono secured with a deep and tight obi sash, knotted at the back into a rigid bow. Her hair was tied up, fixed in place by hairpins.

White makeup had been applied to her face in the manner of a geisha, and in her hands were two tessen, folding fans with razor-sharp edges.

She and Ulrich had appeared in Lyoko's desert sector, flat dunes interrupted here and there by rocky outcrops: an environment so empty and desolate that it left one quite dizzy. But Yumi was dizzy enough already without the help of the



♦ I'M NOT HUMAN ♦

landscape: it was fair to say that she was a little disorientated.

"How are you doing?" Ulrich asked sympathetically.

"I'm fine, I think."

"The first time's the hardest when it comes to finding your feet here. But that kimono really works for you, you look amazing!"

Yumi did not reply. She took a few hesitant steps, feeling a ringing sensation inside of her head. It's all because this isn't real, she thought to herself. That's why you feel so lost. It's because you can't feel the atmosphere in which you normally move.

Ulrich smiled. "Don't sweat it. Your eyes and body take a while to adjust to Lyoko, but it doesn't last too long."

Yumi looked towards a white tower that stood out in the distance.

Her mind could not comprehend the purpose of the structure. The dark base of the tower was a mass of thick roots anchored in the ground. From them rose a pure white cylinder, which vanished into the dimensionless sky.

"It's beautiful, wouldn't you agree?" queried a voice from beside her.

Yumi spun round. It was Aelita.

Goodness knows why, but she had expected someone very different. Taller. More...developed. But instead the person standing in front of her was a frightened girl.

"Beautiful and...mysterious" she replied as she turned to regard the tower again.

Ulrich took a step away from the two girls. "And we can't enter it. Only she can" he said, indicating towards Aelita.

Yumi nodded. "Ulrich told me that you're like the...guardian of all this."

"In a certain sense, yes."

"And he also said that there are...monsters out to get you."

"They'll be out to get you too, if you're with me."

"Why?"

"I'm not really sure. And I don't know the purpose of the towers..."

Aelita never got a chance to finish her sentence.

The whole horizon suddenly shook with a strong vibration, a kind of digital earthquake, leaving the three children staggering to stay on their feet. One second later the tower, beforehand perfectly white, shot off an azure flash, and then began to emanate a disturbing blood-red fog. Like a thousand nails scraping against the surface of a giant chalkboard, a shrill and acute song began to resonate in the air.

"Run for it, right now!" yelled Jeremy, his voice coming from all around them.

"What's going on?" Yumi asked, suddenly frightened.

The elf-girl grabbed her hand and led her towards the shelter provided by a cleft rock, which they pressed their backs up against.



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"You'll be safe here" she advised. "If you're lucky, he shouldn't see you."

"But what's happening? Who shouldn't see me?"

"His name is X.A.N.A. He's the being that's after me."

The tower had begun to flash intermittently.

Aelita observed it with a worried expression on her face.

"Now he's found me" she added, her voice loaded with tension. "He's calling his monsters to..."

Once again she was interrupted before she could finish speaking.

Out of the sand beside them erupted the skeletal body of a tarantula-monster that reared up abruptly, seizing Aelita.

Yumi dove and rolled in the sand while Jeremy cried out in fear: "Aelita, no!"

But instead of striking the girl, the monster held her up in front of its hairy body. An instant later, it pressed a horrible proboscis against her chest.

"NO!"

Aelita struggled to breathe. The proboscis was crushing her chest, as if trying to pierce straight through her. The Eye of X.A.N.A. tattooed on the spider was close enough to touch. The monster sniffed at her, *smelling* her.

Then, a metallic hiss cleft the air.

One of Yumi's tessen fans came out of nowhere and cut the monster's body in half, emerging from its Eye of X.A.N.A. in a burst of light.

The monster dissolved into nothingness and Aelita collapsed onto the sand.

Someone offered her a hand to help her up. It was Ulrich.

"Sorry for making you wait a moment there" he said with a smile.

Over his shoulder, the tower was beginning to vibrate alarmingly.

"I must...go treat it" she said mechanically.

They escorted her up to the roots of the tower, and then Aelita phased through the wall and finally floated up to the master platform.

She pressed a hand against the translucent display. It recognised her immediately.

AELITA CODE LYOKO

The symbols scrolling on the walls of the tower began to fall. Once again, X.A.N.A.'s presence was swallowed up and sucked away. Cancelled.

Banished.

"Does he attack us...through the towers?" Yumi had asked, while they waited outside. The desert sector's winds were sweeping the sand in every direction.

"Something like that" replied Ulrich. "And he wants Aelita"

"So he'll be back?"



♦ I'M NOT HUMAN ♦

"He always comes back..." whispered the elfin girl, exiting through the white walls of the tower. She staggered towards them and fell against Yumi, exhausted.

Yumi supported her and caressed her face. "What happened to you? You look so tired..."

"It passes eventually. I endure it until then."

Yumi looked towards Ulrich, concerned. "Can't we get her out of here?"

"We're not sure how."

"Jeremy?"

"Ulrich's right. When you're in Lyoko you have a certain number of life points at your disposal. Every attack the monsters land on you is deducted from your total. Bit by bit your life points are reduced to zero, and when that happens, you're removed from the game. But for her it's different..."

At those words, Aelita lifted her gaze. There were tears in her eyes. "Yes, for me it's different. I *am* different. You guys are only 'playing' in this virtual reality, but I *live* on Lyoko, this is my reality!"

"Aelita, no..."

"I'm not a human being! I'm just a computer program, a piece of software!"

"But you're wrong!" Jeremy vigorously shook his head.
"X.A.N.A. is a computer program. You're not! You are nothing like him!"

"I am exactly like him!"

"But you're trembling" said Yumi, holding onto her tightly, like a big sister.

Aelita looked up at her.

"You're trembling because you're afraid" continued Yumi, smiling. "And from what little I know, computer programs don't feel fear."

Imprisoned in the digital universe of Lyoko, Aelita never needed to sleep, eat or drink. And she did not age. Jeremy however was suffering from a perennial headache that had denied him even a moment's peace for several days. He now spent all of his time before the computer, planning, analysing, and struggling to comprehend. But, most of all, he was speaking with Aelita.

"Right, Aelita" he whispered into the camera from the darkened confines of his bedroom.

"Now stand up and concentrate."

"What time is it there?"

Jeremy checked his laptop's internal clock: it was three thirty in the morning.

"Not particularly late" he lied.

He had locked himself in his bedroom at the school for...he was no longer sure how long. From here he was accessing the factory's computer via a remote uplink. For a computer whiz kid of his calibre, setting up the connection was a simple task.

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Ever since the day that Yumi had entered into their little circle of friends Jeremy had fortified himself in his bedroom. He was barely even leaving for meals: Odd and Ulrich had taken to bringing food up from the cafeteria for him. They had urged him to get some rest, but he had ignored them.

"Let's give it another try."

"Jeremy, I'm not sure if I want to."

"We have to Aelita. There's no other way."

"If you say so. But you're making a mistake."

"I'm certain I'm not."

Jeremy watched her on his monitor as she crossed to the centre of the bright concentric circles inscribed on the floor of Tower 3. Then he crossed his fingers and set the program in motion.

It was an algorithm designed to compare the digital data of Aelita on Lyoko to that memorised in the control console under the old factory. Anyone who entered Lyoko was broken down into virtual data and saved in the supercomputer's memory: this data was essential for the person to make the return journey.

But, for some reason, Aelita's data would not synchronise.

Inside Tower 3, Aelita was lifted up into the air, her head tipped back and her arms outstretched to the sides. Then she gradually became transparent until only a wire-frame, a three-dimensional sketch of her, remained.

The girl could no longer feel anything. Now Jeremy focused his attention on the computer monitors, where a pro-

gress bar was advancing rapidly beside a graphic representation of Aelita.

Twenty percent, thirty, forty. When sixty was exceeded, he held his breath.

The computer reached ninety percent and then began to slow down. His upper lip was now beaded with sweat. Ninety-three, ninety-four. The computer struggled to ninety-nine percent and then froze up.

SYNCHRONISATION FRROR

"But why??" Jeremy flew into a sudden rage, smashing his fist against the surface of the table. He tapped at some hot-keys and, inside the tower, Aelita began to return to her normal appearance, finally dropping down to land on the ground.

"So, how did it go?" she asked as soon as she had recovered.

"We're still not there. Your body can be rematerialised and that must mean that you entered Lyoko through the factory's scanners at some point...but, for some reason, you can't get back out. You have a problem at the mental level, I think."

"At the mental level? How is that significant?"

"It means the computer can't match the data saved at your time of entry with what we're now trying to output. Something inside your mind has...changed."



♦ I'M NOT HUMAN ♦

"Maybe it has something to do with my memory loss. Perhaps I have less 'data' now that I did beforehand."

Jeremy was observing the numbers that were appearing on his monitor. "Or perhaps, it's the other way round, you have an *excess* compared to before."

Aelita looked at him, suddenly curious. "Can you send me the data from your computer? I'd like to verify it as well."

"I think I can do that, yes."

In the white tower that served as her shelter a floating display appeared, and in a few seconds it was populated with numbers. She studied them attentively and eventually spoke.

"These numbers are like...memories. A *mountain* of memories."

Jeremy reflected on this for a moment, and then nodded. Aelita's memory had always been fragile, and vulnerable. Till now he had not considered the possibility that this was due to an information *overabundance* and not vice versa.

"Funny, isn't it?" she added.

"How so?"

"My mind is full of memories...that I don't remember having!"

"As if they didn't belong to you" Jeremy murmured absentmindedly. "Like if someone implanted them in you...from the outside."

"But who would do something like that? And why?" "I don't know."



"Perhaps they're the software that allows me to function in Lyoko. And that outside of here, in the real world, they're useless to me."

"Perhaps."

Or maybe this is what's motivating X.A.N.A. to hunt you, Jeremy thought to himself. That would suggest he's not out to kill you. Perhaps he wants those memories. He needs them.

"Jeremy?"

"What is it?"

"Maybe you could successfully extract me if you deleted this junk data, these additional memories."

Jeremy sighed "I'm not sure, and it could be quite a painful process."

"But you can try, right?"

"We'd be running the risk of damaging your memory permanently."

"But the rest of me would still be alright, correct?"

"What do you want my answer to be?"

"I'd like for you to say yes."

"This could be very dangerous."

"Delete them, Jeremy."

"And what if afterwards we still can't materialise you? What if we find that we deleted all this data to no avail?"

"Then it would mean that you were mistaken. And that I was never...like you."



♦ I'M NOT HUMAN ♦

On the day that they attempted to materialise Aelita, Yumi virtualised into Lyoko to be by her side. Odd and Ulrich however, were waiting for her in the scanner room. They had planned out everything: Odd had informed Principal Delmas that his 'cousin Aelita' would be attending Kadic, Ulrich had falsified the necessary enrolment forms in her name, and finally Jeremy had used his vocal manipulation software to confirm the whole story, telephoning the school posing as Aelita's father.

Now Jeremy sat at the keyboard in the control room, his finger hovering over the *Delete* key.

"Do it, Jeremy!" Even though she was trying to appear confident, Aelita was still very tense.

Yumi took her hand. "Don't worry about it, everything will be fine. Well, except for the fact that you'll have to go to school with the Three Stooges..."

"But what about you?" Aelita asked.

"I'm a grade ahead of you. But we'll still see each other in the cafeteria and the intervals between classes."

"That sounds wonderful."

"It will be, just you wait and see. Better than this place anyway. Think about it, no monsters to be fought, no evil computer programs hunting you..."

Yumi cut off abruptly, looking towards the other girl with concern. "Are you alright? What just happened?"

Aelita had lifted a hand to her forehead. "It was nothing, just a flash of pain, in my head."

"It's done" Jeremy announced. "I just deleted it...all of it.

Now we'll see if we can bring you back here. Are you ready?"

Aelita took a deep breath and shut her eyes. "Yes."

"Ok. Then you'd better enter the tower. So, let's do this."

The system was armed and ready to go. Jeremy checked one last time that they were ready to begin streaming data. "Materialisation!" he exclaimed at last, stabbing a key.

Moments later on Lyoko, Aelita rose into the air, slowly decompiled and began to disappear into nothing. Five percent.

"Now we cross our fingers...and hope that this works, guys" Jeremy whispered, unable to hold back the rising tension.

Meanwhile the computer kept on processing, working to match every fragment of virtual Aelita with its corresponding part of flesh-and-blood Aelita, as she had been when the scanners had committed her physical body to memory.

Thirty percent. Forty. Sixty. Eighty.

When they reached ninety percent, once again the computer started slowing down.

Responding to the emergency, Jeremy launched the program that he had spent all those long nights preparing. "Activate memory masking program!"

Ninety-eight. Ninety-nine. The screen lit up red.

Ninety-nine point ninety-nine. "C'mon, c'mon, c'mon...ONE HUNDRED!"



♦ I'M NOT HUMAN ♦

Jeremy let himself collapse back against the seat's backrest. It had worked!

Down below, in the scanner room, the sliding door of one of the columns slid open and a girl staggered out.

She had red, rather than pink hair, and while her ears had a sweeping curve to them, they were hardly elfin. Her clothes were unfashionably outdated.

"Aelita?" Odd asked in an uncertain tone.

The girl leaned against a wall to support herself. Confused, she looked around her and her eyes locked onto her own hands. She opened and closed them several times and stared incredulously at her palms. Then, finally, she lifted her head and saw Odd and Ulrich, who were wordlessly staring at her.

"Guys...is that you? You're...different to what I imagined."

"What, did you think I had the tail here as well?" Odd joked. "Well if you're expecting me to start purring while rubbing up against your ankles, you're way wrong!"

There was a moment's silence. Then the three of them began to laugh uproariously, until Ulrich, striving to maintain a serious demeanour, announced in a solemn tone: "Aelita, welcome to reality!"

"Is everything ok?" Jeremy asked over the loudspeakers.

"It all went smooth as oil, so we'll bring her up now."

"Great. I just have to materialise Yumi as well."

Jeremy's voice was serious and professional, but it was obvious that his attitude was only skin-deep.

When the door to the control room began to open, Jeremy rose from the command-chair with a start, and watched them from a distance with his hands folded behind his back and a nervous smile on his face.

Odd and Ulrich entered flanking Aelita like a pair of bodyguards. Jeremy removed his glasses and cleaned them with the hem of his T-shirt, much too embarrassed to look directly at them.

"Come on man, aren't you going to give her a hug?" exhorted Ulrich.

"Well, you see..."

But Aelita had already leapt ahead, running to embrace him, and seconds later was stuck like glue to her personal saviour.

7

JOHN F. BULLENBERG

(GULF OF MEXICO, JANUARY 9TH)

The motorcycle, a turbocharged Suzuki Hayabusa capable of speeds of over three hundred kilometres an hour, screeched around in front of the hangar and braked sharply, leaving a long, black strip on the asphalt.

Its reckless rider was a young man of some twenty-three years of age who was wearing a pair of torn jeans, a black leather jacket and a small rucksack.

He kicked down the bike's stand with a foot and pulled off his helmet. "Hola, Fernando!" he called out to a mechanic in blue overalls who was exiting the hangar, tossing the Suzuki's keys to him.

"John, you're leaving us again?" the mechanic, speaking in drawling Spanish, seized the keys in mid-flight.

"Yeah, the holidays are over unfortunately! Can you park the bike for me? I've held them up enough as it is."

"No problem."

The private jet was a Gulfstream G550 worth almost sixty million dollars. Over its clear blue livery was picked out the multicoloured logo of Music-Oh, the great online music portal.

John F. Bullenberg directed himself up the gangway staircase, to the open cabin hatch where a beautiful flight stewardess was waiting for him.

"Welcome aboard, Mister Bullenberg!"

"Call me John, we're the same age after all."

The girl's perfume smelt of flowers. "Actually I'm a year older than you, Mister John" she replied, blushing.

John smiled. Entering, he turned to face the cockpit: Tony and Matt were waiting for him, mugs of coffee in hand. On the lapels of their shirt each wore a pin carrying the Music-Oh logo, which also looked good on the uniform of the stewardess.

"Hey guys!"

"We're ready to depart" Tony said. "Do you want to take the controls for take-off? This sleepy old man beside me needs someone to relieve him."

"Hey" teased Matt. "You're the old man who needs a nap."
John had recently obtained his Private Pilot License, and
both Tony and Matt knew how much he loved to pilot the jet.
But this time the boy shook his head.



"Sorry guys, perhaps the landing. But I've got to focus on work right now..."

The passenger cabin was an elegant lounge furnished in mahogany and clear white leather. John made himself comfortable in the nearest seat and pulled a laptop computer out of his rucksack.

"Would you like anything to drink?" the hostess enquired. John had never seen her before. She had to be new.

"No, thank you."

Until the age of twenty-one John F. Bullenberg had been a boy no different to anyone else: a penniless student of the University of California, in constant arrears with his rent and examinations. Then, one day, an idea had struck him for a computer program that could put music lovers across the world in contact with one another.

He had programmed the first version of Music-Oh late at night, after finishing his shifts at the fast food outlet where he worked. Since then his life had taken a turn in the complete opposite direction: fast motorcycles, private jets, villas all over the world.

Right now he was about to depart Costa Rica, where he had invited a few friends to spend Christmas with him, heading home to California.

John F. Bullenberg was living the gilded dream.



"Take-off will be in five minutes" Tony announced over the loudspeakers. "Meanwhile, there's a call for you from Margie."

Margie was John's personal assistant. He had also hoped she would be his fiancée, but up to this point his attempts on her had been unsuccessful. She had also refused his invitation to join him for Christmas.

The young man picked up the telephone receiver built into his armrest.

"Hello."

"Have you taken off yet?"

"We're still on the ground. Is there a problem?"

Margie was a petite girl with black eyes, extremely beautiful and always smiling. Now though her voice was serious and worried.

"Listen, John. It looks like Music-Oh has been infected with a virus."

This was not a rarity: last year there had been over a hundred attacks and John had a team of programmers on hand responsible for dealing with them. But this time Margie had decided to skip that stage and bring the issue straight to his door.

That meant it was time to start worrying.

"Is it serious?"

"Right now it's only infected a few computers. But that's not the problem. It's just...I've never seen anything like this virus."



Only ten computers? Music-Oh's online community encapsulated almost five hundred million members: why was Margie disturbing him for something this trivial?

"Have you done any projections? What's the rate of infection on this thing?"

"Put it this way: do you remember the information meltdown people expected the Millennium Bug to cause? We're talking that bad, or worse, except unlike Y2K, this would be real."

John was having trouble believing his own ears. He considered the possibility that Margie was pulling his leg or exaggerating things. But Margie did not make jokes. He could not imagine her pulling one over on him at *this level*.

"Ok. Email me a report and I'll go over it now. Have you called Francis about this?"

"I can't get through to him, he's still on vacation. I was hoping you had a way to contact him."

"Yeah, I do. I'll wait for your report. I missed you" John added hurriedly. Then he ended the call.

Through the G550's windows he could see that they were rolling back from the hangar, the aircraft manoeuvring towards the runway.

By the time Margie's email arrived they were in flight. The message consisted of just two lines.

Here. Solve this quickly, the first line said.

The second was a link to the Music-Oh website.



John clicked on it and on the screen of his laptop an image appeared. Two concentric circles, with three bars arranged at the bottom and one at the top, like the target on a shooting range.

Or maybe...an eye, he thought.

"Sir, I've prepared you an iced tea" the stewardess said.

John did not reply. He opened the debugging application that allowed him to troubleshoot Music-Oh's software. He analysed the website's source code, which everything else ran on top of, and made some modifications to it.

"Right, let's see if it works now" he said through gritted teeth.

He tapped the *ENTER* key. For several seconds he waited. Then, his mouth fell open as the coding he had laboured long and hard to program began to move, to fluctuate, the letters and numbers spinning across the screen in a vortex of symbols. They were compositing into an image. The same image.

Two concentric circles. Four little bars.

That strange eye again.

John cursed, beating his fist against the soft white leather of the armrest. He tried to exit from the debug application, but found himself locked in.

"Is everything alright sir?" asked the considerate stewardess.

John sighed. "No actually. Nothing's right at all."

From a jacket pocket he extracted his phone and used it to shoot a pair of photos of the image on his screen. He then



forwarded them in an MMS to his friend Francis. *Figure this crap out for me*.

Then he switched off his laptop.

And swore again.

John's MMS was bounced by his telephone through a bridge repeater, and then to another, and then through yet another. During this process a small digital fragment inserted into the message suddenly changed course. It was only a short code string, nameless and amnesic, but in a certain sense it was alive. The program managed to penetrate the telephone company's central server network and from there it spread its net, calling for its many scattered, nameless fragments. They were waiting for it.

It was like a magnet attracting tiny metal filings to itself, and in so doing becoming stronger and stronger.

His digital cells were slipping back into place, resuming their function. They focused their efforts on trying to crack into the treasure vault, trying to access his locked-away memories.

I have not died, the being thought, still hunting for further fragments of himself.

One of the telephone company's servers spooled up to full speed as the digital entity travelled along the telecommunication lines.

I have not died.

Oh yes, my memories.



I am coming back for you.

Several seconds later, in a remote house somewhere in Maine, a phone belonging to a programmer named Francis began to ring.

The man picked up the telephone and read the newly received message.

Figure this crap out for me.

There were two attached messages: both showed the homepage of Music-Oh, something he had seen millions of times before.

Thinking it could be a trick, he messaged back: *this "crap"* happens to be the most beautiful website in the world.

Almost immediately the phone began to ring. "Francis? Are you trying to be funny?"

"What do you mean?"

"I just sent you two pictures of that strange virus. That kind of...with the two circles and..."

"John, can you please explain this rubbish you're spouting? There's no virus in the two pictures you sent me. As a matter of fact, there's nothing in them, apart from Music-Oh's homepage."

John had to ask Francis to message the pictures back to him before he was ready to believe him. True enough, the site had resumed normal operation.

The virus had disappeared, leaving no traces.

As if it had never existed.



Fragile

Jeremy Belpois



FOR AELITA



534







1 ELECTRIC TORCH

Essential for exploring the underground floors of the abandoned factory.

2 SUPERCOMPUTER MOUSE

It's the only mouse that can connect to the Supercomputer.

I took it as a souvenir, when we decided to shut the machine down.

3 DIGITAL CAMERA

With this digital video camera,
we have put your memories back together,
Aelita.



The final testimony of professor

Franz Hopper in which he explains
the mysteries of Lyoko.

5 DRINKING CHOCOLATE

An excellent fuel for avoiding the cold.

6 CLOTHES-PEG

Essential for every descent into the sewers, the clothes-peg is worn fixed right on the tip of the nose.

Never forget it!!!



1 SWISS ARMY KNIFE

My pocket knife, faithful companion to each of my adventures.

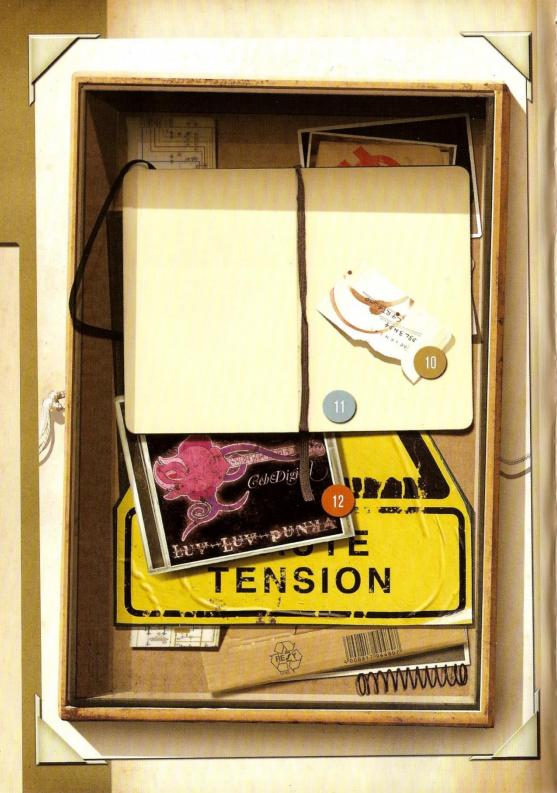
8 TRAIN TICKET

The voyage that allowed us to discover the secrets of the Hermitage.

9 HORROR FILM

Odd's favourite film.

We've never understood



10 LEET GODE

A thing computer programmers use to not forget the most complicated passwords. It works by substituting certain letters with numbers.

11 NOTEBOOK

We found it in the attic of the Hermitage. It belonged to professor Hopper. At least, that's what we reckon...

12 CEB DIGITAL - LUV LUV PUNKA

The new single from the band of the century. The soundtrack of this whole story.



13 B&F CEMENT BAGS

These are the bags of cement found in the cellar of the Hermitage.

This allowed us to trace the Broulet brothers.

14 CIRCUITS

The factory was filled with indecipherable plans like this one. It's surely a circuit sheet from the Supercomputer!

15 LYOKO'S MONSTERS

My sketches of the monsters that populate Lyoko, seen from the computer screen.



16 BUSINESS CARD

A business card for professor Hopper.
We haven't found anything else on him.

17 LE CHAT NOIR (THE BLACK CAT)

I would never have thought that Odd was interested in literature.

This book seems fantastic.

I really must read it.

18 IRON BRIDGE

The bridge at the old factory.

You can't have forgotten it, Aelita...



After a long, odorous walk, finally an opening to fresh air!

But the surprises are just beginning...

20 THE HERMITAGE

The H.Q. of our investigations.

Professor Hopper's old house is a labyrinth of secret passages.

21 MEDALLION

It's your medallion, Aelita.

Your father and your mother had ones, identical. Look for Anthea...



This doll was one of your belongings, Aelita... Does it remind you of anything?

8

CHOCOLATE, BOOKS AND SECRET PASSAGES

(CITY OF THE IRON TOWER, FRANCE,
JANUARY 9TH)

"Achoo!" sneezed Odd.

"Achoo!" Yumi echoed him.

Jeremy laughed. "Perhaps coming out here to talk about things wasn't such a good idea, given the cold."

"We can carry on back in the Hermitage" Ulrich agreed. "I can't feel my legs anymore, they must have frozen. So, what do you guys say? Shall we get back inside, where it's warm?"

"At your orders, boss!" Odd yelled, and before anyone could stop him he flung a snowball at Jeremy's head.

He collapsed and sprawled out across the ground.

Yumi shut herself in the bathroom to enjoy a hot shower and wash the cold out of her. Ulrich and Odd, on the other hand, had entrenched themselves in the living room, buried under ten centimetres of duvets and blankets, watching a horror film. Kiwi had curled up between Ulrich's legs, and he was fruitlessly trying to displace the dog.

"Ha ha!" Odd laughed at Ulrich's struggles. "You guys make me laugh too much."

"I don't think anything could make you stop laughing" Ulrich replied dryly. "Short of decapitating this little monster."

"Exactly! You guys are too much! Just you wait and see eh? Like when we were outside. Oh, I couldn't believe it...Ha, ha, ha!"

Aelita was observing the little scene from the kitchen door. "Odd is pretty incredible" she commented amusedly.

"In the sense that it's incredible someone could live so long without ever making use of his brain?" Jeremy queried, smiling.

He took a small pan from the shelf and put it on the electric hotplate, taking care not to burn himself. Then, he started to pour in cocoa powder and milk.

Aelita sat down to watch. "Hot chocolate would be wonderful right now."

Jeremy took a furtive peek and saw her satisfied expression



"How are you feeling now?"

"Um. I'm not sure. Back when you guys were telling the story, it seemed to me like I was remembering something. Flashes of memory, here and there. But I had the strange sensation that it never really happened, as if I had only dreamt it..."

Aelita sweetly laid her head on Jeremy's shoulder, her short red hair brushing against his neck. "Can I ask you something?" she asked, whispering.

"Of course you can."

"Why, after all the trouble you had gone to in recovering me from the supercomputer, didn't you shut it down forever?"

The cocoa powder swirled in the pan, slowly dissolving into the milk.

"Actually, we did try to turn it off."

"But something went wrong?"

"Yes. X.A.N.A. had demonstrated a willingness to do anything to survive. To prevent us from extinguishing him forever he used you..."

"Used...me?"

Jeremy looked her in the eyes. He studied her face minutely, noting that he was still mentally adding a pair of elf ears to her.

"You are the cure, Aelita. The only person who can deactivate the towers and...defuse X.A.N.A.'s attacks."



"Again, the towers...but why are they so important? How do they work?"

"Oh, we worked that out eventually."

Jeremy mixed the chocolate, his eyes lost and vacant. "The towers are...bridges. They're the key to everything that's happened to us. They act like connections between the world of Lyoko and *this*." As he finished his sentence, Jeremy rested his hand on the microwave.

Aelita raised an eyebrow. "There's a tower in the oven?" "Hey, I'm being serious here. On Lyoko there is a tower practically for every piece of electrical machinery on the planet. So if you activate a tower 'there'..."

"...you are actually modifying the properties of something 'out here'. Alright, I understand."

"Correct. Theoretically, through the towers X.A.N.A. was able to take control of electrical equipment. Of anything that operated electrically. Including..." Jeremy touched a finger to his forehead. "...our brains, which function through bioelectrical micro-discharges. With obvious exceptions of course. Odd, for example, is not in any danger."

Aelita giggled, though in truth she felt anything but relaxed.

Yumi emerged from the shower with her hair wrapped in a towel. Odd and Ulrich were still under the covers, watching the film's final 'exhilarating' scene.

"Where are the others?" she asked.



"They're just off having a private chat" muttered Odd, his mouth full. "Biscuit?"

"How can you be eating, we only had lunch an hour ago!"

Odd shrugged and continued to munch on his half of the biscuit. The other half had been thrown to Kiwi.

"Here we are!" called Jeremy, emerging from the kitchen with Aelita. They joined the others on the couch, laying down a tray carrying the mugs of chocolate, each one piping hot and deliciously aromatic.

Smelling the rich aroma, Kiwi whined lowly.

"Ok, here we go!" Odd roused himself and grasped the cups of chocolate from the tray to distribute them out. "Now's the time to drink a beautiful chocolate toast! To us...and to the last day of our vacation!"

"Cheers!"

"Mm, delicious!" Ulrich commented, chewing in satisfaction. "You even left the lumps in, just how I like it..."

Jeremy glanced over the rims of his glasses. "What lumps? I mixed it really thoroughly."

"Still..." Ulrich said. His cheeks were full and he was engaged with chewing.

Then he suddenly stopped. His eyes, shot through with red, began to roll madly, while his face became purple. After several seconds, Ulrich spat his mouthful of chocolate all over the blankets and the floor.

"Water!" he cried, getting to his feet. "Get me some water, quick!"



"Ooodd."

Odd was near suffocating with laughter. "Lumps! I slipped him some extra-strong chilli! Ha ha! I thought it would make our Ulrich's chocolate really *unforgettable*!"

The friends exchanged a perplexed look, and then they exploded in a noisy chorus of laughter.

Ulrich returned from the kitchen with his eyes streaming. "Ugh! What a stupid joke!"

"Oh Mister Stern, don't give me that face! And I've heard chilli's good for the heart, so I just did wonders for your health."

"Revenge, Odd! Revenge!"

Yumi stopped Ulrich by seizing hold of him from behind, still unable to stop laughing.

"Instead of taking your revenge, why don't we all do something as a group?"

"Yeah, that sounds good" Odd agreed immediately, happy to escape his well-deserved punishment for the joke. "What did you have in mind?"

"Let's explore the attic" Yumi proposed, a strange light shining in her eyes.

The topmost floor of the Hermitage was isolated from the rest of the house and devoted to a gigantic study. There were no computers however; only a large desk covered with papers and three blackboards covered with half-rubbed-out mathematical equations. Pushed into a corner was a little

sideboard on which rested a coffee machine and an electric stove, along with a dirty and chipped mug.

And the rest of the space was taken up with books. Books upon books. Hundreds of them piled up on precarious shelves or stacked on the floor, opened and closed, big and little. Year upon year of old magazines and periodical backissues were sealed in big cardboard boxes.

The attic was lit by three windows. The first overlooked the Hermitage's driveway and the road. Through the second, which looked in the opposite direction, could be seen the snow-mantled park and beyond, the buildings of Kadic. And finally the third window, the widest and largest, offered a striking view of the old industrial quarter, and in the distance could be seen the bridge and the old factory on its island.

The Hermitage. Kadic. The factory.

Three places separated by several kilometres of asphalted roads, but connected by a dense network of underground passages.

And by secrets.

Jeremy approached the first bookcase and skimmed his finger along the dusty spines of the book covers.

"Look, it's all here!" he said to Aelita with a certain satisfaction. "From basic mathematics to advanced computer theory!"

He seized a volume that looked like it must have weighed at least two hundred kilograms and leafed through some of the pages.



"Ah, now this is a real treasure!"

Odd started sneezing wildly. "Ah...achoo! Really I would have preferred something more traditional. Achoo! How about, oh I don't know, a casket of golden doubloons..."

"That's just because you're ignorant" retorted Ulrich, laughing.

Yumi had started searching through the notes and sheets scattered across the desk. "Notes, scribbles, even a list of expenses."

Kiwi plunged his muzzle into an overturned rubbish bin, and then he awkwardly worked his entire body inside.

"Guys, I'm not sure I understand. What do you mean by 'it's all here'?" Aelita said, caressing some of the old objects in the attic. "All of what?"

"Err, perhaps we should have explained it to you beforehand" Odd replied absentmindedly.

"Explained what to me?"

"We were just waiting for the appropriate moment" Jeremy intervened.

"After all..."

"Can you please enlighten me as to what the heck you're talking about?" Aelita insisted.

Jeremy came up to her. "It's very simple. This house used to be your home."

"My home?"

"Right."

"Do you mean that I used to live here?"



"Yes. Together with your father. The creator of Lyoko." Aelita could feel herself begin to sway. "My father...

created Lyoko?"

"Yes. Your father's name was Franz Hopper. *Professor* Hopper. He was a teacher at Kadic."

"No...wait a second..." Aelita shook her head confusedly, scattering so many thoughts that she was struggling to hold onto. "My father created Lyoko, honestly?"

"Yes. While you were studying at the Academy" Jeremy continued. "It seems like it was all moving along quietly, but then..." he broke off abruptly and looked at her intently. "Does the sixth of June mean anything to you?"

Aelita shook her head. "No, should it?"

"That was the day when you and your father escaped together. The day on which you passed through the scanners under the old factory, and entered Lyoko."

"We were...escaping?"

"Don't ask me why. We don't know."

"And when did all this happen?"

"1994. Ten years ago."

Aelita seized her head between her hands, completely lost. "Ten years ago? But...if I was a student at the school...then how old was I?"

"You were twelve...more or less."

Aelita fixed him with a distressed stare. "That's not possible! If that was true, then I should be over twenty years old!"



Jeremy could not imagine how painful and upsetting this all had to be for her. But this moment could not be avoided forever, and he had accepted that. Aelita had to remember. And with those memories, inevitably, the pain would return as well.

He forced a smile onto his face, as kind and sweet a one as he could manage. "But you're not. I know this must seem impossible to you, but you have not aged. Because you were in Lyoko, time stopped for you while the supercomputer was deactivated."

Aelita seemed confused. Her forehead wrinkled and her face drew taut, as if she was making a superhuman effort to assimilate and understand all this new information. "So who was it...who deactivated the supercomputer then?" was all she could ask.

"We don't even know that" Jeremy answered, shaking his head. "It might have been your father. Or possibly the people who were pursuing you. Perhaps someone who simply thought the supercomputer was too dangerous to leave running."

"I was...living here with my father" repeated Aelita, as if trying to convince herself. Then, a light seemed to ignite in the depths of her eyes. "And...I must have had a mother as well...right?"

"I'm sorry but...we don't know anything about her." This time it was Yumi who answered her question, she herself struggling to not burst into tears.

Aelita looked at her silently. It was all so completely absurd and riddled with shadows, endless questions without answers. And in any case, no matter how hard she strained, she could no longer think. She felt empty, as if drained of energy.

With an unconscious gesture, she took from Kiwi's mouth a notebook that the dog had found while ransacking the rubbish bin. The black leather cover was wrapped in an elastic band. Acting mechanically she opened it and leafed forwards: all the pages were white.

Empty. Like my mind.

Slipping the notebook into the back pocket of her jeans she sat on the floor. She wished that she could just close her eyes and wake up a month later, having forgotten everything she had been told of her past.

"Guys." Odd's voice suddenly cut through the tense silence. "We're way too skittish in this dusty old attic. And our special day is starting to turn into a funeral. What do you say to doing something a bit more fun?"

"What did you have in mind?" asked Yumi distrustfully.

"Well, how do you feel about...hide-and-seek?"

The reaction of the others was tepid to say the least. Odd looked around and sighed in disconsolation. "Ok, I get it. I'll be 'it' first. But you better not make it too difficult for me to find you!"

♦ CHOCOLATE, BOOKS AND SECRET PASSAGES ♦

Then he exited the study, leaving the door open while he covered his eyes and started to count in a loud voice: "One, two, three, four..."

Jeremy decided that, in light of things, Odd's idea wasn't so bad.

He caught hold of Aelita's arm and whispered in her ear. "Let's go this way."

9

EVA SKINNER

(CALIFORNIA, UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, JANUARY 9TH)



From above, Meredith Logan High School seemed a luxury hotel rather than a school: a single six-storey building, bent in a horseshoe shape, encircling the great principal court-yard. There were long and winding footpaths, a golf course and even an artificial river on which the boys and girls could practise their rowing.

Meredith was situated between the city of Berkeley and the Briones Regional Park, in western California. It was considered one of the best schools in the United States of America, not only for the high educational standards set by its staff, but also for the school's ability to organise a wide variety of extra-curricular events, from music concerts to sports tournaments.

♦ EVA SKINNER ♦

On this Sunday, the ninth of January, the whole school had been thrown into confusion. At dawn the main courtyard had been invaded by articulated trucks and caravans, and now an army of workers were unloading and assembling stage sections, threading cables together, securing lights with bolts. Around midday the general confusion was worsened by students arriving back from their holidays early.

It was a strangely hot day for the season, more than twenty degrees, and so the students were wearing short-sleeved T-shirts as they gathered where decorations were being hung, announcing: *CEB DIGITALS, LIVE CONCERT!*

A small group of three female students carrying lunchboxes had arranged themselves under 'Old Joe', an elderly pine tree situated on a little promontory next to the school. From here they had a fantastic view of the entire courtyard.

"Wow, isn't this incredible?" Suzy said, losing herself in the excitement. "It was really worth the effort to return to school a day early."

"I can see that now!" echoed Jennifer. "Hey look, you can see the stage now. Holy cow, that is HUGE!"

The third girl, Eva Skinner, wore her blonde hair cut short, in a manner that drew attention to the perfect line of her nose.

Eva turned around to face her companions, rolling her blue eyes and long eyelashes in a manner that had turned the heads of many of Meredith's male students. "Sure it's big,

but the stage at Los Angeles was at least double the size" she said icily.

Of all of them she was the only one blessed with the good fortune to have attended the event of the century: the Los Angeles Ceb Digitals concert, where they had performed in front of almost a hundred thousand people. As a result she had been elected president of the school's fan-club, and was qualified to judge the work of the band's roadies.

Susy sighed. "My father had promised to take me as well, but he had a conflicting appointment at the last minute."

"Yeah, but to win your forgiveness he bought you a pony for Christmas" Jennifer reminded her.

"Yeah, and I loathe horses. They stink."

"Anyway, the stage is nowhere near as big" Eva ruled, steering the conversation back towards her favourite subject. "And the lighting array is smaller. Plus, at Los Angeles, the concert was in the evening, and not in the afternoon. Can you imagine it? In the dark the images they projected of Gardenia reached as high as the stars..."

"I wish I could have been there!" grieved Suzy. Then she searched around in her handbag and pulled out the digital camera her uncle had given her for her birthday. "Shall we take some photos? So we can post them on the Music-Oh forums."

Eva put on a sulky expression, unconvinced. "There's only three hours until the concert and in that time I have to take a

♦ EVA SKINNER ♦

shower and style my hair, apply my makeup and pick out my dress. I've got no time to..."

"But you are the *president*" Suzy clarified with a malicious smile. "Certain responsibilities fall to you."

Eva had to go down to the school's reception banquet with a list of the various items of food everyone wanted. And then, Jennifer implored that she help with her hairdo.

"So when am I meant to get ready?"

"You already look really beautiful. I'm begging you here, it's an emergency!"

Giving in, Eva helped dry and arrange Jennifer's hair, and to put a pink streak in it.

"The perfect Gardenia look" the other girl nodded, gazing into her mirror with satisfaction.

Eva resisted the urge to say that the contrast of her friend's sandy hair and the colourfully dyed forelock only served to give her a rather stupid air. She was ready for the next request, that she paint Jennifer's face with green facial cream, and agreed immediately, provided that she could go to her room afterwards.

When she finally escaped Jennifer's room, she found Suzy running up the long corridor towards her.

"What is it this time?" asked Eva, now on the verge of despair.

Suzy handed a CD to her. "The photos. I burnt them onto this" she panted.

"But can't I publish them on the site *after* the concert? There's only an hour to go now!"

"Girl, are you joking? With the Ceb Digitals here at Meredith we'll make a *million* contacts! You won't be able to move for all the fans!"

"Ok I'll do it. Give me the disc."

Eva entered her room in a furious rush, stripped her clothes and slipped into the shower. Instead of the long relaxing soak she had planned she had to make do with a quick rinse. Then she wrapped a bathrobe around herself, turbaned her hair with a clean towel and, dripping water on the floor, ran to her computer.

Uploading the photos was going to be a real chore. On concert days the Music-Oh forums could suffer terrible lagging due to the increase in activity. While the computer booted itself Eva took advantage of a few seconds peace to varnish her nails. She shook her hands back and forth to make them dry faster.

Meanwhile she used her foot to press the button that opened the computer's DVD-drive.

Fortunately, being president of the fan club had ensured her a reserved space in the front row, and she didn't have to worry about arriving in advance to crowd against the barriers like lesser mortals.

But she was still running against time.

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She grabbed the mouse and clicked on her desktop's Music-Oh icon.

On the monitor the Ceb Digitals emblem appeared: a rose whose stalk was fused with the neck of an electric guitar. Eva gave it only a familiar absent-minded glance.

Then the image flickered and wavered. The flower's red corolla began to open out and darken in colour. Eventually a strange drawing appeared in place of the emblem. Two black concentric circles. Four little radial bars, one above and three below.

The girl batted her eyelids in confusion.

Her mouse spat out an electric-blue spark.

And then Eva remembered nothing.

10

THE SECRETS OF THE HERMITAGE

(CITY OF THE IRON TOWER, FRANCE,
JANUARY 9TH)

Jeremy led Aelita towards the writing desk and showed her a trapdoor set into the floor of the study: a simple bit of planking made of a lighter-coloured wood than the rest of the parquet floor. Together they lifted it, raising a cloud of dust that left them both sneezing. Beneath it was a narrow spiral staircase that corkscrewed downwards, hemmed in by sparse cement walls.

"Incredible!" exclaimed Aelita. "It's like a secret passage." Jeremy smiled. "That's exactly what it is, a secret passage that leads straight to the basement. And you've seen nothing yet: would you believe that there is another underground passage that connects here to the old factory! We think your father was using it to reach his laboratory without drawing

♦ THE SECRETS OF THE HERMITAGE ♦

unwanted attention. Or, it's possibly how you escaped there ten years ago."

"You say that as if that's something normal..." Aelita took his arm, forcing him to turn to face her. "Please Jeremy" she whispered, looking him straight in the eyes. "Please Jeremy, I need you to tell me everything you know about this, right now!"

"Fair enough, but only if you don't go and make a sudden new discovery" he tried to joke. Then, seeing Aelita's severe expression, he immediately became serious. "Honestly, there isn't anything we've not already shared with you. All we've discovered is that your father was somewhat... secretive. And that he arranged for the house to be riddled with escape routes and hidden passages."

"But why all these...secrets?"

"We believe it can be attributed to the 'private' nature of your father's research. And perhaps some of these hidden entrances were for the convenience of whomever he was conducting that research for."

"What do you mean? Who...was my father working for?" Jeremy shook his head. "We're not sure. All we have to go on for now is a name: the Green Phoenix."

"And that means?"

"It means that for now, we're fumbling in the dark."

There followed a long silence that seemed to stretch on forever, during which Aelita remained immobile, frozen at the



top of the spiral staircase that disappeared down into the shadows.

"Have you located all of these passages?" she asked unexpectedly, as if waking up from a long sleep.

"No unfortunately. The structural plans for the Hermitage are long gone. But we discover a new one every time we explore the house. That's why it's so much fun to play hide-and-seek here!"

He smiled at her and winked.

Aelita returned the smile and placed one foot on the first step. Then she seemed to reconsider it and turned to face Jeremy again.

"Let's never let any secrets come between us. Agreed?" Jeremy gazed at her seriously and nodded. "I promise. Now we better head down before Odd discovers us."

The basement of the Hermitage had more in common with a warehouse than a cellar. Jeremy and Aelita emerged from the hidden passage and closed the door behind them: it was covered with a cement panel so as to make it practically indistinguishable from the walls around it.

Straight in front of them was an industrial-strength refrigerator, an entire chilled room sealed off by a reinforced metal door. On the right another room served as a pantry, a cluster of metal shelving units still stacked with boxes of food purchased in bulk.

♦ THE SECRETS OF THE HERMITAGE ♦

Now they started to follow the dark passage, lit only by opaque windows at ceiling level. They found wardrobes crowded with brooms and cleaning detergents, and emerged in a huge room, almost empty and only occupied by a pair of clotheshorses and an old washing machine.

Jeremy knew that this was all a difficult burden for Aelita to bear, and he felt guilty that he could not completely share in his friend's pain. But at the same time he himself felt strangely content, an emotion that was quite rare for him. He was on vacation, spending time with his friends. And the hide-and-seek had given him the perfect excuse to be alone with Aelita. Perhaps it was wrong of him, but he could not help it.

And in truth Aelita seemed to have taken to this tour of the Hermitage's basement as an opportunity to divert her attention. "And where does this go?" she asked curiously, as they arrived at the entrance to a darkened passage.

"It leads down to several other passages that we've not fully explored yet. It's a good twenty minute walk. And then...who knows."

Aelita had the sensation of having been here once before, though she could not remember precisely when. Her attention was drawn in the opposite direction. "And this is?" she asked.

It was a little square room a few metres long on each side, which looked like the stores of a builder's yard. Sacks of lime were piled into a corner and covered with dust, along with



big boxes of broken tiles. There was a dirty pail of mortar and an old trowel.

"Wait a minute" Aelita said. "You've never been able to find the plans for the Hermitage, correct?"

"Right."

"But there must have been other people working on all this. I mean like the contractors. Maybe they could be able to tell us something."

"Um." Jeremy looked at her in admiration. "You're right. I never considered that." He crouched down to examine the sacks closer. "There's something written here but its illegible, completely worn-out. Here, help me to move these, perhaps the ones behind might be better condition."

They weighed a tonne, but between the two of them they were able to drag the first row of sacks forward on the floor by a few centimetres.

Aelita slipped into the space they had created and stooped to read. "Bingo! '*B&B-Broulet and Brothers, 117 Rue De Tivo-li*'!"

"That's right on the other side of the city" observed Jeremy.

"But that means my father hired a company with that address. Maybe they're still in business. We could go there right now."

"Hey hey, slow down!" Jeremy exclaimed. "Don't we at least want to finish the game?"



♦ THE SECRETS OF THE HERMITAGE ♦

Aelita smiled. "Think about it! Is an enquiry of this kind any less boring than playing hide-and-seek?"

Yumi and Ulrich advanced through the snow-covered garden, their feet sinking several centimetres into the soft mantle. After several steps Ulrich's socks had already soaked through and he had started to sneeze. "Oh yeah, going outside was a great idea! Why stay inside in the comfortable warmth! Plus we're leaving a trail of footprints: Odd will find us in a second!"

"Argh!" burst out Yumi. "If you just stopped moaning you might start enjoying this fresh air. Besides, don't you find it romantic?"

Ulrich stopped. "Ro-romantic?" he stammered confusedly.

He suddenly felt as if Yumi had struck him right in the chest with one of her most painful kung-fu attacks.

"C'mon, let's get out of here" his friend exhorted, taking him by the hand and leading him up the frozen access path towards the gate. Yumi's hand was warm and Ulrich suddenly felt sweaty under the collar, in spite of the cold. Before his eyes, her black hair seemed to sparkle in the wintry afternoon light.

Yumi suddenly stopped. "Oh, now there's a coincidence. Look who's here as well" she whispered.

Ulrich instinctively turned to look in the same direction as his friend and went rigid. A moment later, he had embraced



her and hurled her to the ground, throwing himself down in the deep snow next to her.

Because at that precise moment, standing at the gate was their schoolmate, William Dunbar, wearing a grey woollen hat to protect his slightly-too-long black hair, and an elegant greatcoat that was zipped up to the collar. From his ears emerged the wires of an MP3 player, and the boy was whistling along to the music.

"Do you mind explaining what's gotten into you?" screamed Yumi, half suffocated by the snow. "Were you trying to kill me?"

"For pity's sake, keep quiet!" Ulrich whispered, pressing a finger against her lips. He turned fearfully to see if William had noticed anything. But the other boy had peacefully continued in his tranquil walk, heading goodness knew where.

That finger on her lips had literally enraged Yumi. She hurled Ulrich to one side with a judo movement and rose to her feet. The usually white skin of her face was now a fiery red and her expression was rabid.

"Mister Ulrich Stern!" she hissed. "You didn't want William to notice us, is that the case? You didn't want him to say hello to me!"

"Just let it go, alright?"

"You will not dictate to me what I will and won't 'let go'! You have no right to do that! No right at all!"



♦ THE SECRETS OF THE HERMITAGE ♦

Whereupon the girl set off with great long strides back towards the house, leaving Ulrich, drenched in snow, to wonder what, precisely, he had done wrong.

11

EVA SKINNER

(CALIFORNIA, UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, JANUARY 9TH)



It felt good. It felt alive.

And even if it had lost much precious time to find the right person, the result was worth all the trouble. Not that little boy in Massachusetts. Not even the young man on the private jet.

Eva.

Through her he would shape his destiny.

Through her, his Chosen.

The security guard was two metres tall and just as large, with a dark T-shirt pulled on over the muscles of a body-builder. He shot a dark glare into the girl's eyes. Then, he noticed her *FAN CLUB* badge and gestured for them to pass him. "This way" he said in a surly tone.

Eva Skinner advanced through the metal barricades followed

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by Susy, Jennifer and five other girls from the club's guiding committee. They had avoided the earlier chaos as the crowd assembled.

To their right-hand side the pupils of Meredith Logan were pressing up against the barriers. To the left there was the stage, separated from the public by only a low wall and a short piece of lawn.

The band's percussion section took up almost half of the available space, with five bass drums and an unspecified number of snare drums, cymbals, tom-toms and kettledrums. There were bongos and tribal drums for the slower songs, and a long rack on which the multitude of guitars Freno would need during the concert were stored.

Bumba's keyboards, mounted on spring-loaded stands that allowed him to move to the rhythm of the music, were positioned next to the special effects computers. And finally there was Gardenia's microphone and Mistik's bass guitar, resting on an easel in the centre of the stage.

"Incredible" Susy murmured, her eyes wide open.

"Insane" Jennifer mimicked the sentiment.

Eva however, did not say anything. She was watching the stage technicians who were about to connect the last of the cables. The huge plasma-screen TVs were playing a looping video of the highlights of the band's world tour.

The girls were in a fantastic position: they would be the first ones to see Gardenia when she came on stage. "Enjoy life and long live rock and roll!" she would yell.

And then: "We are the Ceb Digitals!"

Suddenly, all the stage lights illuminated and the students crowding against the barriers began to chant: "Ceb-Dig! Ceb-Dig! Ceb-Dig!"

Their disappointment was huge when they realised that the person advancing between all the instruments onstage was not Gardenia, but Professor Hanna Jeffrey Logan, the school's principal and great-great-granddaughter to Merdeith, its titular founder.

There followed a long silence, before Logan began her attack: "This event that you are all so enthusiastic for, is in fact an educational moment of great importance for our school...music is fundamental in the shaping of young minds...and this concert will resound across the nation..."

After five minutes of this incessant droning the students could not take any more. The chant started up again with more strength than beforehand, punctuated this time with isolated cries of: "Enough already!"

"We want Gardenia!"

Gardenia's name began to run from one mouth to the next, building into a deafening roar. Eventually the headmistress raised her hands and concluded: "...as I'm sure you understand. Go in peace, and now, without further delay, I would like to present the famous Ceb Nominals..."

"CEB *DIGITALS*!" screamed back the gathered crowd, with enough force to mess up her hair.

"Yes, of course, as you were. Good afternoon."



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She made a quick about-turn and onstage the lights went out.

"Here it comes" a trembling Eva whispered. "They're starting."

The sound of Mistik's bass began to spread in the air, punching out the same note repeatedly, and the crowd's enthusiasm went through the roof. The security gorillas had to press against the barriers with all their weight to prevent them from collapsing.

Then Freno began his guitar solo. The stage was still empty.

Then a woman's voice, clear as crystal, addressed the public: "Enjoy life..."

"AND LONG LIVE ROCK AND ROLL!" the audience responded in chorus.

"That's right." It was almost a whisper, but it emanated a mad energy, as if trying and failing to suppress itself. "Today, at Meredith Logan High School of BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA!"

The voice had risen for a moment, but then suddenly returned to a whisper: "We hadn't planned on your graceful headmistress being the opening act...but didn't she warm you up for us? Luckily for us though, we no longer have to go to school."

Cries, laughter.

"We are here for you! We are here to entertain you! We are...THE CEB DIGITALS!"



The lights blazed on and the musicians came running onstage.

Then there was an explosion of music, motion, voices, and Eva did not understand anything anymore, except that she was perfectly happy.

An hour and twenty minutes into the concert, she had screamed to the point of losing her voice. When Freno launched into a loud guitar solo, the adrenaline had clenched her throat shut so violently that she thought she was about to faint.

"Ladies and Gentlemen!" announced Gardenia from the stage. "We're proud to now perform for you our latest single. It's called..."

The public finished it for her: "LUV LUV PUNKA!"

The guitar's intensity increased, the other instruments joining in, and behind the stage the darkened widescreens suddenly lit up, playing the song's music video. A little boy was waking up in a disorderly bedroom, was eating breakfast...

"Life is sometimes weird-a, boring-a, slow-a, But that's my call 'coz I LUV LUV PUNKA!"

Gardenia was dressed in the uniform of a cleaning lady. She was walking along a street, saw the little boy making his



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escape and took his hand. In a rainy back-alley Freno was playing his guitar while laid out in the gap between two rubbish skips, then the camera zoomed up onto the staircase of one building's fire-escape, where Bumba was playing his keyboards.

"I know I wanna say that I LUV LUV PUNKA!"

Gardenia was now picking up a rose and imbuing it with new life, the stalk lengthening down to the ground and taking root, growing into a robust plant that lifted Gardenia and the little boy up into the sky. The flower's corolla was opening in a whirl of colours. Then, for an instant, the petals transformed.

They became two concentric circles, forming an eye. Something that Eva had seen before.

It happened so quickly that no-one else in the crowd took any notice of it. But the image was implanted in Eva Skinner's brain

And around her, everything became black.

12

THE MYSTERY OF THE BUILDERS

(CITY OF THE IRON TOWER, FRANCE, JANUARY 9TH)



The game of hide-and-seek had been quickly wrecked.

Odd had only just started looking for the others when Jeremy and Aelita had reappeared through the trapdoor in the attic and asked him to stop. Then the three of them had gone searching for Ulrich and Yumi, quickly finding them in the living room, sitting in silence on the couch. Something must have happened, because the girl seemed furious and Ulrich was regarding her timorously, like an inexperienced animal handler facing off against an undomesticated tiger.

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"Aelita has an idea" Jeremy announced to them. "In the cellar there are some sacks of cement marked with the address of a construction firm in the city."

"So what?" asked Ulrich.

"We were thinking of going to the address on the sacks and seeing if anyone there ever worked on the Hermitage."

"On a Sunday?" Yumi intervened.

"This is the only day when we're free to do what we want. School starts up again tomorrow after all."

"Do you know how many years those sacks may have been mouldering down there Einstein? I'm guessing at least ten."

"It was only a suggestion."

Ulrich was wiping snow from his hair with a towel. "Is it really that important?"

"Jeremy told me about the secret passages" Aelita explained. "Perhaps if we talked to the people who helped build them we could learn something we don't already know. Maybe one of them knew my father..."

They stared at her in silence.

It was Yumi who eventually said what everyone was thinking: "Getting to the bottom of this isn't going to do us any harm."

"But it doesn't make sense for all of us to just get up and go together" objected Odd. "Someone has to stay here and prepare snacks for later."

"I don't believe this, you can't always be hungry!" exclaimed Jeremy.



"Odd's right. There's no need for all of us to go. For example, I'd be better off staying here to clear the house with..."

Yumi indicated towards Ulrich with her head.

"Get this mutt off my legs!" Ulrich hissed in the silence that followed. "Or I'm going to smother it with the towel!"

It was snowing again. Icy needles were settling lightly on the clothes of passers-by, turning them into irregular white figures.

Odd sneezed. "I don't understand why this fell to you and me in the end!"

Jeremy smiled. "No, you probably wouldn't. But consider this: Ulrich and Yumi evidently need to make peace with one another, but they would never have agreed to stay alone in the Hermitage together. Hence Aelita had to stay behind with them."

"But I could have stayed behind instead! I would have had them signing an armistice in a nanosecond!"

"More likely you would convince them to skip the niceties of diplomacy and have them jump straight into kung-fu negotiations!" Jeremy concluded, sniggering.

He wasn't sure what exactly had transpired between the two of them, but he was certain that at some point William Dunbar had entered the picture. The majority of Yumi and Ulrich's arguments revolved around him in some form or another.

♦ THE MYSTERY OF THE BUILDERS ♦

The grey sky grew darker still, until it was as black as the surface of the road they followed through the buildings and streets of the city.

"Exactly what are we looking for?" Odd asked after a while.

"117 Rue de Tivoli" Jeremy reminded him. "It's the address of a firm of contractors called Broulet & Brothers. If they really did some work on the Hermitage, and assuming someone there still remembers Hopper, they might be able to provide us with some information."

"How much time has passed since when they probably worked on the house?"

"At least eleven years. Possibly more."

"Uh-huh" commented Odd. "It seems to me that we're out here catching pneumonia for nothing."

The two boys crossed the Place de la Révolution, an open square of dark paving tiles surrounded by small shops bedecked with Christmas lights. They cut down Rue de Provence and passed several people wrapped up in waterproof jackets, waiting for a bus that would never come.

"Rue de Tivoli should be the second or third road on the left "

It was an anonymous street of offices. As they proceeded down it, the smart buildings gave way to poorer buildings in dire need of repair, alternating with sad warehouses.

"Hey, this is only Number 2!" Odd had said, indicating the address of the first of the grand civic buildings. "Great, another lovely long walk lies ahead of us."



It felt like trekking up to Calvary, the wind smacking at their cheeks and whirling more and more snowflakes into their eyes. The sidewalks were treacherous frozen panes of glass and so instead the boys trudged up the middle of the road, where snowploughs had sowed salt and transformed the snow-covered asphalt into a dense and muddy slush.

Their destination was an old and shabby building, perhaps the most run-down on the entire street. The front, which in better days had probably been a beautiful olive green, was now almost grey and the snow stuck to the surface as if it was fly paper. The door was a simple brass frame supporting two dark and filthy glass doors. The intercom beside it had twelve buttons, and none of them was marked with a name.

"Alright Einstein" said Odd. "It's a dead end. No-one's lived here for at least a century."

"We should try some of the buttons at random. Or do you want to start straight back?"

They looked down the long street back to Rue de Provence and sighed. Then they mashed all the buttons simultaneously and stood waiting.

"Goodness knows if this still works" Jeremy grumbled, stabbing randomly at some of the buttons again.

Then, from behind the glass doors a thin voice could be heard: "I'm coming! I'm coming! Always rushing about. Today is a holiday, you know?"

A key turned in the lock and the door shook, but still didn't open. Then Odd seized one of the door handles, yanked it



♦ THE MYSTERY OF THE BUILDERS ♦

towards himself and found himself holding an impressively elderly lady between his arms.

She was very short and very frail, like a little girl. The skin on her face, stretched tight over the cheeks, was almost transparent and her little eyes looked tired but kind.

"Oh, my!" the old lady exclaimed, docilely liberating herself from Odd's embrace. "You really are quite hasty, young man!"

"Excuse me Madam..." replied Jeremy, somewhat embarrassed. "We're looking for someone from the firm of Broulet & Brothers. Is this the correct address?"

The old lady smiled. "Aren't you a little young to be in the builder's trade? In any case, yes, you have the correct address. You better come inside. It's too cold to be doing much talking outside."

"But is Mister Broulet here?"

She did not answer, limiting herself to inviting them inside. "I've just made tea."

Jeremy and Odd shared a fleeting glance. A cup of tea didn't seem like such a bad idea right now.

The lady, Marie Lemoine, lived in an apartment on the ground floor of the building, with several items of furniture that had seen better days, a prehistoric black-and-white television, and a radio the size of a sideboard that was crackling out music from the last century.

The tea was faded in worn ceramic cups, along with a plate

full of biscuits of a decidedly dubious appearance. Odd inserted one in his mouth and Jeremy saw his eyes bulge as he forced himself to chew. He decided not to try them.

"Perhaps they aren't as fresh as they used to be" admitted the old lady. "It's not often that I have guests, you see."

Jeremy decided that the time had come to explain the purpose of their visit. "As I indicated beforehand, Miss Lemoine, we are looking for Mister Broulet."

"Of the firm Broulet & Brothers" appended the woman.

"Now they haven't worked out of here for quite some time."

"Do you remember anything about them?"

Marie gave Jeremy a severe glare. "For your information young man, I have been the superintendent in this building for almost twenty years, and I have a photographic memory. If you thought I'd forget Philipe, Jean-Jacques and Jean-Pierre Broulet then you're much mistaken. They had an office here on the first floor for ten years, until... Care for another biscuit?"

With surprising agility, the old lady picked one of them up off the plate and threw it straight into Odd's mouth, who quickly turned purple and started coughing violently.

Marie Lemoine continued: "As I was saying, they were here for ten years before Jean-Pierre and Jean-Jacques died. An unfortunate work accident. Corrine, the girl who helped them with the accounting, told me that the two brothers were working on a scaffold. They didn't have many workers, it was a small firm, and the sad truth is that the scaffold collapsed.

♦ THE MYSTERY OF THE BUILDERS ♦

Philipe was the youngest brother, the kind of person who was always cheerful. But in just six months he had sold the firm and rented the offices out to Mister Gaston. Now there was a gentleman, if I don't say so myself, there was this one occasion..."

"And Philipe? What happened to him?" Jeremy cut in.

Marie seemed somewhat annoyed by the interruption. "He moved to a city in the south. He said he couldn't bring himself to stay here anymore."

"When did all this happen, what year?"

Marie sipped calmly at her tea, enjoying being the subject of their total attention. It seemed she was taking her time so as not to ruin the suspense. "You two little boys are very strange. You come here, on a Sunday afternoon, to interrogate me about things that happened over a decade ago! In any case, it's been...let me see...when was it that Philipe moved away?"

She suddenly turned to Odd. "You are quite the smiley type, and quite a gourmet. Are you sure you wouldn't care for another biscuit?"

Odd remained immobile with his lips sealed, fearful of finding another one lodged in the bottom of his throat.

Jeremy decided to intervene in the interest of protecting his friend.

"Miss Lemoine" he said in the most well-mannered tone he could manage. "I apologise for asking this of you, but did



Philipe leave any means by which you could contact him? I don't know, maybe a telephone number?"

"Of course! He left his new address and telephone number, so that we could arrange for his payments to be suspended, along with various other matters. Closing a business is a complicated affair you know. There's a mountain of bureaucracy to overcome. Suppliers to settle with, contracts that need to be ended..."

"And do you still have that address?"

"Why are you interested?"

Jeremy bit his lip, trying to think of a quick excuse which at the same time would sound convincing. "My friend," he said, indicating towards Odd, "is Mister Broulet's grandson, and he's never met his grandfather."

At those words, the old lady rose from her chair and planted a rough kiss on each of Odd's cheeks. "Philipe's *grandson*! I never knew he had a son or a daughter...but yes, I can see the resemblance! You have his eyes! And how come you have never met your darling grandfather, young man?"

Jeremy kept improvising. "Err...well...it's a very sad story! Philippe's daughter, the mother of my friend, had to move to Paris and unfortunately has lost her memory. But she's told us so much about everything that..."

"She told you? How can she if she's lost her memory?"

Jeremy had become entangled in his own story and it was up to Odd to try and cut him free. "Might I have another cup of tea Miss?" he asked innocently. "Thank you for being so

♦ THE MYSTERY OF THE BUILDERS ♦

kind" he added quickly. "You know, this has always been my dream. To reunite the family I mean..."

Marie Lemoine's expression melted into a smile and she seemed to cast aside any uncertainties. "Of course, of course. You poor young thing. I'll go looking for your grandfather's address. I've got an archive of all the old building tenants in the living room, it'll be somewhere in there..."

The old lady shuffled into another room and returned several minutes later, a crumpled slip of paper in her hand.

"Here it is! He doesn't live in the city anymore, but you can find him here..."

She pressed the scrap of paper into Odd's hands.

When they were back outside, surrounded once more by the snow, Jeremy looked amusedly at Odd. "Tell me the truth. Were those biscuits really that *horrible*?"

"You have no idea."

Jeremy laughed heartily.

13

EVA SKINNER

(CALIFORNIA, UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, JANUARY 9TH)

"Are you alright?" a woman's voice asked kindly. "You've opened your eyes."

"You gave us quite a scare" a girl joined in.

Eva Skinner was in the school infirmary, and floating in front of her were the concerned faces of Doctor Johan and her friend Susy.

Eva opened her mouth, but was unable to speak.

Something within her was manipulating her like a marionette. Something that had taken control of her mind. X.A.N.A. was now giving the orders, one at a time. To open the mouth. To articulate the language. To speak.

It was all very complicated.

Doctor Johan smiled. "You fell ill suddenly at the concert" she said gently.

♦ EVA SKINNER ♦

III? thought X.A.N.A. He had never felt so good. He felt *great*. All he had to do was acclimatise to this new body. And recover from the long and laborious journey he had begun as a digital fragment hiding at the bottom of the sea: he had become an Internet virus, a video message relayed through a phone, and finally the music video at the concert. All to find the right person.

Eva Skinner.

"Thankfully you don't seem to be badly hurt. Your parents will be here shortly to take you home."

Eva tried to speak again, and again she failed. It was a terrible effort.

"Let's leave her for now" the doctor told Susy. "She needs to rest."

The girl looked reproachfully at Eva. "You better get better soon. I missed the end of the concert to be here."

Now Eva found herself alone in the room. For X.A.N.A. this was a perfect opportunity to become better acquainted with his new body.

He had to learn how to move and speak.

He managed to take control of the eyes. Right, left, up, down. He tested the limits of his vision, looking from the far end of the bed up to the neon light set in the centre of the long ceiling, and from the window to the door.

Now he had to consider the rest of the body.

He concentrated and tried to move a finger. The index of the right hand. Nothing happened.

Move...the...finger. You, the finger, move. Please, finger...Dammit! The right fist abruptly clenched shut. Anger. That was the trick: don't ask it to happen, just make it happen.

Eva opened her mouth. "Eeeeeeeeh" was his first word. It was a confused and strangled moan, but it was a start.

Next, he wiggled all his fingers and toes. When he managed to raise the bed sheet he realised he was making good progress.

He rose to her feet, and ended up face-down on the floor. Lashing pain engulfed his body. Stupid, weak humans. Somehow or other he managed to lift himself onto all fours. Then he stood up and tried to walk again, fell down again, but this time his hands were ready to mitigate the blow. Try again. He got back onto his feet. This time he managed two steps before falling. Try again.

Half an hour later he had managed to walk the entire length of the room.

Approaching the window he opened it: the infirmary was on the third floor and overlooked a relatively quiet road, where an old van was passing by, vomiting black smoke from its exhaust pipe. At the bottom of the road, a woman in pink overalls was jogging along, holding the leash of a small dog in her hand.

Eva considered for a moment the prospect of simply jumping down from the window. No, she decided. She couldn't risk breaking a bone. That was unacceptable.

♦ EVA SKINNER ♦

There was a gutter pipe attached to the building's wall that came within half a metre of the window. Climbing down did not seem an impossible enterprise.

She clambered onto the windowsill and took hold of the pipe, which emitted a metal groan. She quickly began to climb down, barefooted and dressed in only a hospital gown, her attention focused on the necessary motions: hand, foot, hand, foot. When she was almost at the bottom, she allowed herself to fall and landed on her back, sprawling out on the asphalt and feeling another flood of pain. Just how fragile was this body?

"Did you just hurt yourself darling?" asked the lady with the dog, rushing in her direction. Her greying hair was tied up in a ponytail and her face was almost hidden behind a large pair of sunglasses. Two wires could be seen emerging from her ears. "Are you in pain baby?" She removed one of the earphones. "Why are you almost naked? You don't even have shoes! Wait here while I call someone!"

Of course: human beings often changed their garments, and probably Eva's current ensemble was inappropriate. She considered her options. Then she rose to her feet and approached the woman.

About ten minutes later Eva walked calmly away, wearing a pair of pink overalls several sizes too big for her, the arms and legs rolled up to prevent her from stumbling.

Behind her, on the street corner, the small dog was barking desperately.

14

AN UNEXPECTED

(CITY OF THE IRON TOWER, FRANCE, JANUARY 9TH)

It seemed that peace had finally returned to the Hemitage's living room.

Yumi and Aelita were chatting and smiling while Ulrich was sitting quietly on the couch. Every so often he flicked a popcorn kernel towards Kiwi, the scrappy little dog catching them in his mouth.

Jeremy picked up the telephone receiver and motioned for silence.

He dialled in the number they had been given.

"Hello?" a deep voice answered on the third ring.

"Hello, good afternoon to you. I'm looking for Mister Philippe Broulet."

"Who might you be then?"

"My name is Jeremy. Ehm, Jeremy Belpois. I wanted to talk to him regarding something from several years ago. I am...a friend."

"Alright, I'll pass you onto him. Just be aware that he's quite deaf, so you'll need to speak up when you talk to him."

The next person Jeremy heard was a man, wheezing tiredly as he spoke slowly into the phone: "Hello, who is this?" "Hello sir, I..."

"Eh? I can't hear you. Who did you say you were again?" "HELLO. GOOD DAY TO YOU."

"Oh, that's better. I can hear you now. Carry on."

"MY NAME IS JEREMY BELPOIS. I'M CALLING YOU FROM THE CITY OF THE IRON TOWER."

"Ah yes. But there's no need to yell quite that loud, goodness me! Yes I know that city quite well. I lived there for many years with my brothers. My word that was a long time ago. People used to call us 'The Three Broulets', my, my!" Mister Philipe seemed to be losing himself in a whirlwind of memories.

"I WAS LOOKING FOR INFORMATION ABOUT A MAN WHO TOUGHT AT KADIC ACADEMY, BY THE NAME OF HOPPER."

"Who?"

"HOP-PER. FRANZ HOP-PER."

The old man's tone abruptly changed. Now he sounded hostile. "Nothing, I don't know anything."



♦ AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY ♦

"BUT WE BELIEVE YOU WORKED ON HIS HOME. THE HERMITAGE..."

"I've never known anyone by that name" Broulet repeated. "Kindly don't bother me again."

And he hung up the phone.

"Pleasant man" commented Jeremy, turning to face his friends. "But you know what Mister Broulet? If you won't speak to us on the phone, then we'll just come speak face-to-face with you."

"What do you mean? Where would we be going?" asked Ulrich, his face turning pale.

Jeremy gave the name of the small coastal city where Mister Broulet resided. Then he added: "It's currently five thirty. If we take the first train we'll arrive there around nine o'clock. We can then return on the last train, around midnight, and arrive back here at three in the morning. Then we catch five hours sleep, and arrive at school tomorrow rested and ready."

"You've completely lost it this time Einstein!" replied Ulrich incredulously. "You want us to travel halfway across France because an old man hung up on you?"

"You don't understand" Jeremy responded. "He *knew* something! As soon as he heard the name of Aelita's father he ended the conversation!"

"Maybe we should have offered to pay him!" suggested Odd. Nobody laughed.



"If he really did work on the Hermitage, he might be able to give us useful information about this house."

Yumi was resting on the couch, a drink in her hand. "But as you said Jeremy, 'if' he worked on the Hermitage. All we know for certain is that his name is on some sacks of cement in the basement. And what you're proposing is a really long journey. If only we could postpone it for a few days."

"Actually I think it's a fantastic idea" commented Odd. "I was beginning to get bored anyway."

Eventually Ulrich sighed. "In the end Aelita should make the decision. After all it's her house we're talking about."

The girl in question, who until this point had seemed somewhat distant, rose to her feet.

"Well, I can tell you what I'm going to do. If Jeremy says this is serious, then I'm going to go and speak to this Mister Broulet. I know it might be hard for you to understand but...my father is gone. This house, with its secret passages and everything else, is the only connection that still binds him to me. If there is someone who can tell me more about the Hermitage and help me remember, then I'm ready to go to the ends of the earth to meet them..."

"And I'm coming with you" Jeremy joined in.

"You'd make a useless knight in shining armour" Odd teased him, landing a friendly punch on his shoulder. "If Aelita goes, we all go."

♦ AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY ♦

They arrived at the station a minute before their train departed. Five children heavily wrapped in clothes to protect themselves from the blizzard. Fortunately they did not have to buy tickets: Jeremy had already taken care of that online.

"Wait for us!" yelled Odd to the railroad inspector who, wrapped in a dark coat, was making sure no-one was left on the platform.

The train's doors closed behind them an instant after Ulrich had shoved Aelita up the gangway and jumped onboard as well.

"Wow, what luxury!" Odd exclaimed "I've never travelled on a TGV before!"

Jeremy smiled "You can thank the school's credit card." "Wait, what?"

"Well, the tickets were very expensive and I didn't have the money to pay for them" explained Jeremy, hunching his shoulders. "So I hacked into Kadic's computers and took the details of the credit card Principal Delmas uses for scholastic expenses."

"Have you gone mad??" Aelita reproached him. "The principal will notice what you've done!"

"No he won't. I filed the payment under the section in '*Unforeseen Expenses*' headed '*My daughter Sissi*'."

Ulrich looked severely at him. "Jeremy, this is called 'theft'."

"Come on guys, I only took that money as a loan! And I have every intention of repaying them down to the last Euro."



Odd laughed scornfully, his fists resting on his hips. "Look at our little whiz kid. Always acting so serious, and then we discover that underneath it all he's talented data-pirate!"

Aelita was not smiling.

"I'm not happy with this" she commented icily.

"Ok, perhaps I made a mistake!" Jeremy admitted. "But no-one will notice, and tomorrow I'll make arrangements for my parents to foot the bill, alright?"

"No. We'll each pay our share."

They settled into their reserved places, four armchairs separated by a small table, and a fifth seat on the other side of the central corridor. At this late hour the carriage was completely deserted, except for them.

The sleek silver high-speed train picked up speed through the city's suburbs, the silence disturbed only by the breathing of the carriage's heating systems. Beyond the windows the city was giving way to a lunar landscape, a mantle of snow draped over everything: trees, fields, the drooping roofs of farmhouses. And the sky was inflamed, dark with the promise of more snow.

"At least we're travelling south towards the heat" observed Ulrich.

"And that gives us three hours to relax! The ideal opportunity for a nap!" concluded Odd, rolling his heavy jacket into a pillow and stretching out on his seat.



♦ AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY ♦

The loudspeakers crackled out the name "Marseille-Saint-Charles".

Their destination.

The terminus was a huge structure with a glass and steel overhead roof. The train rolled in calmly, catching its breath after having run at full speed halfway across France.

Odd checked some notes he had in his pocket.

"Is the place where we need to go far?"

"Place de Lenche. It's not very far, about two kilometres."

The station was at the top of a long and sloping street. High above, on the summit of the opposite hill, they could see the church of Notre-Dame de la Garde, the basilica's towering belfry standing alongside a great dome. Ulrich was right: the climate here in Provence was noticeably hotter than in their home city, even if there was a strong and damp wind blowing in off the sea.

"That way, towards the Panier" decided Jeremy, consulting a map he had printed off the Internet before they had left. "It's the most notorious part of the city."

"Are you serious?" asked Odd, alarmed by that revelation. Jeremy laughed "No! That is, it used to have a really bad reputation, but nowadays it's a tourist trap."

Actually, in summer it must have been a very attractive suburb. Tall and narrow villas with multicoloured facades leaned against one another for support, and the lanes were so narrow that one could not walk down them with arms outstretched. But now it was evening, and the streets were dark.

The children kept checking over their shoulders, fearful that someone could be following them.

Then they had to confront the Montée des Accoules, a long flight of stairs driven between the buildings.

"It is so beautiful!" Aelita commented in admiration.

"Yeah, but couldn't they have provided a beautiful escalator for us to ride up on, this sucks!" Odd lamented, panting as they climbed towards the top.

"Oh come on" Ulrich teased him. "Aren't you supposed to be the one with the agility of a cat?"

Eventually they reached the end of the climb and descended down the other side, emerging into the Place de Lenche, facing towards the Notre-Dame de la Garde. The church crowned the summit of an outcrop far higher than the hill they had just laboured over. Between them and it the land fell off into the harbour, which sparkled with reflections of the city's lights. In the distance they could just hear the sound of waves breaking on the shore.

"That way" said Jeremy, indicating a side-street.

They arrived in front of a tall house. It was painted a faded orange, and had several green, shuttered balconies. Affixed beside the door was a brass plate: FRANÇOIS & LAURETTE BROULET.

And beneath that, PHILIPPE BROULET.

♦ AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY ◆

François was an impressively large and powerful-looking man somewhere in his thirties, with a shaved head that gleamed in the lamplight.

"What do you want?"

Jeremy recognised the cavernous voice that he had spoken to that afternoon on the telephone. He summoned his courage and declared: "We would like to speak to Mister Philippe, if he is home. I telephoned earlier today."

The man did not say anything: his immense tonnage was now blocking the entire width of the door, and he showed no sign of being willing to invite them in.

"Please, this is *very* important to us" Jeremy insisted.

"We've come a very long way in order to see him."

"And why should that concern me?"

Aelita was about to intervene, when a female voice called out from behind the man: "Who is it, love?"

"Five little kids."

"And you're not letting them in, right? Ask them if they've had dinner."

The man snorted, then looked at the children one by one, peering down from his great height. "Have you had dinner?" he asked grumpily.

"No actually" confessed Odd, who was hungry as usual.

"Then I'll prepare some sandwiches!" the thoughtful woman replied from inside.



Grudgingly, François moved from the door and allowed them to pass.

They were made comfortable in a small but cosy dining room. The table was still laid and the lingering smell of a delightful roast dinner whetted the children's appetites.

When Laurette arrived with the sandwiches, the five young guests literally attacked the tray.

"These are perfect lady, just fantastic!" said Odd, who was almost choking on a rasher of ham.

The woman smiled indulgently. "It's nothing, nothing at all."

Then she sat at the table with them, watching while they ate.

"But tell me: what can you want of us at this hour? Are you alone or is someone accompanying you?"

Yumi decided it was better to lie, so as not to arouse their suspicion. "Yes, our teacher" she said quickly. "Today is the last day of our vacation and we wanted to take advantage of it to speak with Mister Philippe. It's very important. We're hoping that he can help us trace someone."

"One of Aelita's relatives" added Jeremy, indicating towards the friend in question. "Please, could you call him for us?"

"There's no need as he's right here" said a voice from behind them.

♦ AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY ♦

Philipe Broulet was a man of around sixty years old, of the same dimensions as his son but with less muscle tone. His hands were those of a worker, big and calloused.

"Dad, these kids were looking for you" declared François.

"Those that called earlier today, I'll wager. Hopper and company."

Mister Philippe sat and rested his elbows on the table.

"I had the feeling I wouldn't get rid of you easily" he sighed.

"That's because it's *really* important Mister Broulet, please believe us."

Philippe scrutinised them at length, stopping when his eyes rested on Aelita.

"I remember that Professor Hopper had a daughter much like you. You could be her twin sister. Even though today she would be...at least twice your age."

"Actually Aelita is the professor's *niece*" Jeremy quickly intervened. "She's the daughter of his...erm, sister!"

The others looked at him, tense, but said nothing. When Jeremy got going with one of his inventions, it was difficult to predict where it would end.

"Yes, that could be it" the man rumbled. "Same eyes. Same hair. François, get me a beer would you, a bitter perhaps?"

"Why did you hang up on me today, when I mentioned the name Hopper?" Jeremy asked abruptly.

"Because...oh well, it's been long enough, I guess."



Philippe took a glass offered by his son, savoured a sip of the beer and began to speak: "I don't remember the exact year. At the time I was still working with my brothers, up north, on our firm. If I'm honest business wasn't particularly good at the time. But then, one day, we were contacted by a man who wanted us to take on a big job, an important job: to renovate part of a factory..."

"A factory on an island?" asked Yumi.

Philippe nodded. "We were paid well for the work we did...too much even. In exchange, the man required us to maintain absolute secrecy about what we were doing. The government was involved, you understand, or at least that's what he told us. He never revealed his name to me, and the company that was paying into our account didn't exist: I checked with the chamber of commerce. Yet the money kept coming, punctual and plentiful, and we were in no condition to refuse it."

He sipped at his beer, seemingly staring at a point in the distance. Then he continued: "We had to go to the site blindfolded, in some vans with tinted-glass windows, like in the movies! And once inside, we were not allowed out of the room that we had been assigned to. None of us ever understood what was being done in that factory, or what we were being paid to set up. I remember there was a lift, and rooms that were being prepared for some...strange pieces of electrical equipment, I think. In any case..."

There was another pause.

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"...the next year, the same man recalled us and introduced us to Franz Hopper. He was a serious kind of man, but nice enough. And he had this little girl that...damn, it seems to me that her name was Aelita as well..."

The room seemed to turn cold. But Aelita quickly intervened. "You mean *Eloita*! My cousin."

"Eloita...it's possible. Anyway, Hopper had moved into the city to work at a nearby school, a sort of high school, and he wanted us to renovate this little old villa that he'd given a strange name to."

"The Hermitage?"

"There you go. Bravo. It was the same conditions: take the cash, keep your mouth shut. We finished the work, Hopper was satisfied, and eventually the mysterious man paid us. That's all there was to it."

"That's all?" protested Odd.

"Mister Philippe, be honest" Ulrich pressed him, smiling conspiratorially. "It wasn't just a simple renovation, correct? We've seen the secret passage that connects the Hermitage, to the factory."

Philippe shrugged his shoulders, irritated. "I promised to never say anything."

"But this is important!"

"And I made a promise. The government was involved. And if it wasn't government, it was still someone very dangerous. I didn't want any trouble then and I can't imagine myself wanting any now."



Aelita stood up and approached him.

"But now my...uncle has died. And I've got nothing left to remember him by" she said in a weak voice.

"And how do you expect me to help?"

"We thought" intruded Jeremy. "That is to say, we believed that you could help us learn something else about the professor."

Laurette, who like François had returned from clearing and washing the plates, smiled. "Come on Philippe. Isn't it possible for you to tell them anything? These are just children, what could they do to you?"

Mister Broulet sighed, and eventually surrendered.

"That's as may be...Laurette, nice reasoning. But in return I'd like another glass of bitter." Then he turned to face the children and resumed speaking: "In fact there is one more thing I can tell you without violating my promises. Hopper came after me again some time later, but this time the nameless man was not with him. 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. I told him it was a pointless job, because someone could easily find it by comparing the house against the plans and elevations in the public records. He answered that he would take responsibility for that problem. He seemed rather frightened. And he offered to pay me, not as

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well as the other man had, but a more than reasonable amount. So I agreed."

"He had a secret room built in the Hermitage?" an incredulous Jeremy replied.

"Cool" whispered Odd.

"But why? What use could it have been to him?" Yumi asked, sceptical.

Philippe Broulet squeezed his eyes, as if trying to seize hold of a faraway image long faded with time.

"The last time I saw Franz Hopper was in the summer of that year. He'd become very thin, consumed with his work. I always suspected that he was more than the simple school-teacher he kept insisting to be. I had just dropped by to collect my payment and to pick up some tools I had left behind. And then he suddenly begged me to leave, as if he was in a great hurry. Before saying goodbye to him however, I posed the exact same question: 'Professor' I asked. 'Do you mind telling me the purpose of a room that nobody can enter?' He smiled mysteriously and replied 'To protect it. And as such, I've left behind a map that only the right person can find'."

They all turned, instinctively, to face Aelita.

"And now kids, that really is the end of my story."

None of them wished to hang around in the city. Not when they had made such an incredible discovery: there was a secret room in the Hermitage!

And a map left behind for a specific person.



Who most likely was the same person who no longer had any memories of her past life, let alone where a map might be hidden.

"To the station?" Jeremy proposed, as soon as the door of the Broulet residence closed behind them.

Ulrich agreed quickly "Let's hit the road."

They quickly retraced their steps along the deserted streets, almost running. Aelita trailed behind the main group by several paces. She wanted to have a little bit of space, and so the others did not disturb her.

They reached Saint-Charles station at just a few minutes before eleven.

"Keep going!" Jeremy exhorted them. "If we take the train due to depart now, we'll arrive back at the house at two instead of three: that gives us one more hour to search for the room!"

The TGV train was already at the platform, standing beneath the illuminated 'Departures/Arrivals' board. The locomotives at either end were powered up and over the station loudspeakers a voice was inviting passengers to board.

The children sprang forwards, sprinting towards the long metal serpent. They leapt inside, the doors closed with a sonorous 'ding dong' and the train stirred into motion, taking them back to the house.

"That's the second time that we've only made it by the skin of our teeth" Odd judged.

"Uh-oh" Jeremy murmured. "We've got a little problem."



♦ AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY ◆

"What?"

"We haven't changed our booking. Our tickets were for the midnight train, not this earlier service."

"Are you afraid they might make us pay a penalty?" asked Ulrich, laughing.

"No, but we won't have seats reserved for us."

Yumi checked inside the carriage: it was deserted. "Looks to me like we're the only ones riding this train tonight. Let's just sit down here. If someone arrives we'll just move to another carriage."



15

EVA SKINNER

(CALIFORNIA, UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, JANUARY 9TH)



It was almost midnight on the last day of vacation.

Vacation.

The word crossed her mind as an annoying itch. It was the thought of *another* Eva, one imprisoned in a peripheral zone of her brain.

The *new* Eva had taken a bus into Downtown Berkeley, the centre of the city. She had sat in silence for the entire journey, listening to the other passengers talking: people who were returning home from work, women with shopping bags, children carrying rucksacks.

When the majority of the passengers disembarked, Eva had done the same. She unhurriedly continued by foot, still

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listening attentively. She soon discovered that in Downtown Berkeley there was a station for the BART, Bay Area Rapid Transit, an important transportation route in the district. A lady had said that the BART went as far as San Francisco.

She wondered if France was nearer than San Francisco.

The crowd was thinning out, little by little. Eva had expected this. It was, as the humans put it 'getting late'. There were few people left on the wide streets that ran between the brick-coloured buildings. She had to make enquiries with them.

She rose from the bench where she had been sitting immobile for the past two hours and turned back towards the BART station. She saw a man in a black uniform, with a baton affixed to his belt. Shortly beforehand, she had seen a lady stop a person wearing the same uniform to ask him for information, referring to him as an 'officer'.

Therefore the men in uniform were there to provide information.

"Pardon...me...officer" she said, using the same words she had heard the lady use.

"Sure little lady" he answered with a smile. He was tall and had a prominent stomach that was straining the buttons of his uniform, a few grey hairs on his head and a thick moustache.

"Pardon...me" Eva repeated mechanically. "Information."

"What did you say?" the officer starched his head, perplexed. "Do you need information?"



Eva nodded: this was going quite well. She tried to smile. "Where...is...France?"

"The Hotel France? I've never heard of it. Are your parents staying there?"

No. She had failed to make herself understood. She repeated herself: "Where...is...France. France...French."

The cop's eyes boggled. "France in *Europe*?" he laughed. "And you want to try and reach that on the BART? Ha, ha. This is a metropolitan line kiddo. You wanna go down to San Francisco and then catch a plane. The *airport*, do you get me? To *fly*. France is on the other side of the world."

Eva nodded. She understood 'airport' and knew what an aircraft was. But the concept of 'on the other side of the world' was evading her.

"Airport!" she repeated, displaying another smile and indicating the station behind her.

The policeman shook his head, concerned. "You're not with your parents, are you?"

"No" Eva replied. She was not concerned, and had not even the slightest idea as to what the man was referring to.

"What's your name?"

"Eva."

"Eva what?"

"Eva Skinner."

"And you're completely alone, Eva Skinner?"

The policeman sighed resignedly, then smiled and took her hand.



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"Come on then. I'll accompany you to San Francisco airport, and then you can show me where your parents are. Ok kiddo?"

He pointed towards his car, black with white doors. On the roof was a long blue light, currently extinguished.

"Thank you" she answered mechanically.

And she climbed in.

On the way she studied how the strange vehicle was piloted. It seemed simple: all that was required was to push a lever into a starting position, and then press one pedal for acceleration, and the other to brake. They were now moving hurriedly between tens of other cars. The light over their heads had illuminated and now drove back the surrounding darkness with intermittent blue flashes.

The officer picked up a strange device with his free hand and began to speak into it. "Robertson to Central. I have in my custody one Eva Skinner, female juvenile of twelve, maybe thirteen years of age. She seems to be lost, and was found alone at Downtown Berkeley station. I am escorting her to Central."

"Airport!" Eva protested, tugging on his arm.

The officer smiled at her. "Sure kiddo, I'll take you there later. But beforehand we need to do some research, do you see?"

A voice crackled inside the small box: "Roger Robertson. Should we call in child services for this?"

"That'd be perfect. Let's get this sorted quickly."

Eva frowned. Things were no longer proceeding as planned. She *had* to reach France and had already wasted enough time.

"Stop."

"What?"

"Stop. Here. I will get out."

"Don't even start thinking like that girl. Now we're going to Central where you'll be taken good care of while a nice lady asks you some questions..."

Lies, she thought. The way he was speaking sounded decidedly dishonest.

"Stop!" Eva cried.

"Hey, hey, girl! Calm down right now" the policeman protested, looking intensely at her.

Eva's arm skimmed over his.

And the car slowed down abruptly.

The officer had passed out immediately, and was now curled up on the back seat of the police cruiser. Eva, sitting in the driver's seat, took the small box between her hands.

"Robertson to Central" she called. Out of her mouth came a voice identical to the officer's. Slightly hoarse, mellow. Adult.

"Central here. You still having problems with the girl?"

Eva turned to look at the unconscious policeman behind her

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"No" she answered, her perfect white teeth revealing themselves as she smiled. "Everything's fine. False alarm. Where's...the airport?"

"Officer Robertson...are you trying to be funny? You'd have to cross the Bay Bridge to San Francisco and then follow the signs. Now if you're done joking, bring that girl into Central. And then go get some sleep. Seems to me you've taken one shift too many today."

Signs. So there were signs.

And she had to *follow* them. Perhaps they moved quickly.

Perfect. She disconnected the conversation. Then, softly singing a little ditty, Eva crushed the accelerator pedal beneath her foot.

16

A BRUSH WITH THE LAW

(CENTRAL FRANCE, JANUARY 9TH)



"Tickets please."

The conductor was a tall and severe-looking gentleman, with pronounced cheekbones over which his pale skin was drawn tight and a long, outstretched neck.

On his perfectly ironed and creaseless uniform there was attached a badge that declared his name: *Monsieur Jules Tatillon*.

Jeremy extracted his phone from a pocket and recited to the man their booking code, before explaining their situation: "We had actually booked places on the next train, but we arrived at the station early and decided to catch this service. Is it possible for our tickets to be transferred?"

"Of course."

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Mister Tatillon checked his palm-held computer. Then he abruptly looked up: "Am I much mistaken, or are you all underage?"

His voice was cool. Impersonal.

Jeremy hesitantly nodded.

"Well, you see" continued the conductor. "This is very strange. These tickets have been booked in the name of one Jean-Pierre Delmas. Is he any of you?"

"Ehm, the truth is, well you see..." Jeremy tried to explain.

But the conductor suddenly cut him off. "I thought as much. He has in fact paid with his credit card, and you're too young to own one of those. And if he's accompanying you, where is he?"

"No-one is accompanying us" Odd intervened, indignantly. "We're old enough to travel alone!"

"So says you."

"Look sir, the other conductor didn't have any problems with us."

Mister Tatillon sighed. "Unfortunately, not all of my colleagues apply the rules as firmly as they should. But that's no concern of mine. Might I enquire who this Mister Delmas who purchased the tickets is?"

"He's the principal of our school."

"And isn't an educational authority forbidden from allowing minors to travel alone outside of daylight hours, and am I correct in thinking you should be in school in a few hours?"

"We're on a mission" Jeremy tried to cut in. "On behalf of our school."

Mister Tatillon made an amused grimace. But there was nothing cheerful in his forced smile.

"Oh, I can quite imagine."

He began to write on a large notepad.

"What are you going to do?"

"Why contact the next station, naturally. We'll arrive there in about twelve minutes. There you'll be placed in the custody of Transport Police, who will contact your parents and headmaster, and try to get to the bottom of this."

"But you can't do that..." implored Odd in a weak voice.

"Oh I can, young man. And if I was in your position, I would hope that your parents have no idea of what's happened and that you had this bright idea all by yourselves. If that's not the case, this could be interpreted as a declaration of Child Abandonment."

This said, Mister Tatillon clicked his heels together and set off down the carriage.

"Where are you going now?" asked a pale Yumi.

"To finish my rounds" the man answered quietly. "But don't worry: when the train stops I'll be back to escort you off it."

"Oh man, my mother always told me I'd end up in prison!" Odd grieved, once the infernal conductor had disappeared into the next carriage.



♦ A BRUSH WITH THE LAW ♦

"Jeremy, this is your fault! We should never have used that credit card!"

"That man is mad!"

"How did you think you could pass yourself off as an 'escort of minors'! Gah!"

"Guys, this is my responsibility..." Jeremy apologised.

"It's not a question of responsibility...the Police! Do you understand? The *Police*!"

"Prison" Odd repeated despondently.

"Calm down Odd, we won't go to prison. We're underage. The worst that can happen is that the principal suspends us from school."

"Suspended? And which of us gets to tell him..."

"THAT'S ENOUGH!" Aelita screamed.

The group fell silent immediately and stared fixedly at her.

"Quarrelling isn't going to do us any good" the girl added, shaking her hair about. "Right now we need to think of what to do next."

"We could escape."

"What, jump off the train? And knock ourselves back to the fourteenth century?"

"When they ask us to get off the train we could refuse."

"Yeeeeeah, and that would end with them genuinely arresting us!"

The real problem was Aelita. Jeremy and the others had created a fictitious identity for her. But if the police did any research into their backgrounds, then the framework that

they had so skilfully built would be quickly shaken apart. The twelve minutes that separated them from their fate crept by with agonising slowness.

Eventually, the train pulled into the science-fiction-like station of Lyon-Saint-Exupéry. It was a gigantic steel-and-glass structure, curved into soft and wavy lines, which in the centre rose into a kind of wing. From inside powerful lights illuminated the surrounding environment like day.

Somebody cleared their throat from behind them: Tatillon. "Children, end of the line."

As they stepped onto the platform they saw a small buggy had arrived, like one that might be used on a golf course. On the little machine's white-and-blue bodywork was written the word *POLICE*. Driving it was a uniformed young man with a tired look about him, short-cut fair hair, and a nose that all by itself managed to fill three quarters of his face.

"I am Officer Roger Crane" he presented himself.

"There you are! These are the children" Mister Tatillon said in greeting. Then he lowered his voice: "In confidence, Officer, I would not be surprised if they had stolen the credit card and used it for goodness knows what else. They don't have particularly trustworthy faces."

"We're standing right here you know!" Jeremy interrupted resentfully.

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Tatillon continued: "And as for that boy there" he indicated Odd. "When he started protesting that I could not call the police, I was concerned that he was about to attack me."

The friends looked incredulously at one another. What breed of conductor had they encountered?

"Look, that's just nuts!" Yumi burst out.

Tatillon raised an eyebrow. "See what I mean?" he murmured, turning away to face the officer.

"It's not a problem" Roger Crane assured him. "And come to think of it, you'd best be off."

"In exactly one minute and twenty seconds" Tatillon said, glancing at his watch. "I certainly can't make the train depart in advance of the timetable."

Seated in the back of the mini police car, the children looked around as they were paraded through the main concourse. The station served the adjacent Lyon-Saint-Exupéry Airport, and even though it was late at night, the loudspeakers crackled continuously, announcing departing trains and planes, and crowds of people were moving en masse on either side. Businessmen, carrying suitcases and with newspapers rolled up under their arms, were drinking coffee at a bar as if it was the middle of the day.

The office parked up outside a great sliding door decorated with the police coat of arms and gestured for them to enter. He led them into a small room: it was empty except for a

pair of chairs leaning against the wall. Then he left, locking the door behind him.

"Well, now what do we do?" asked Jeremy.

"We wait" grumbled Ulrich.

They had no other options. The room was sealed and windowless. Air circulation was provided by two little A/C gratings set almost at ceiling height, and so small that it would have been difficult to fit even a hand inside them.

Odd fell asleep on one of the chairs, his head resting against the wall. Aelita squatted down on the floor, her face hidden between her knees.

They were left alone as time passed by.

The door creaked open sometime around one thirty in the morning, and Officer Crane poked his head in. "Alright, follow me."

They were ushered into another room, furnished with only a little writing desk, cluttered with paperwork, and a chair on which the office sat, leaving them to stand.

The man took a pen and a blank form and said: "Now, in order, I want you to give me your names."

The five held their heads low.

The policeman smiled. "Well, based on the facts available to me, I'll supply you with my version of what I believe has happened here" he said, using the tone of an older brother. "You all thought that since it was the last day of the holidays you should all take a little trip together. You've told your parents a load of poppycock, claiming that you" he indicated

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Ulrich "would be sleeping at his house" he indicted towards Jeremy "and he at your house. You've taken a ride on a fantastic ultrafast TGV, but were nabbed by that boring old man Tatillon and so...here you are. Now, if you tell me your names, I'll phone your parents, you'll each receive a lovely scolding, and we can all go home to bed."

He paused.

"If however, you remain silent, I'll be forced to shut you up in there again and contact Social Services, the case will pass into the beautiful world of official proceedings and you'll all risk ending up in front of a juvenile judge. And after all of that is done, then you'll give your names. And your parents will be much angrier, I can promise you that."

"Jeremy Belpois" Jeremy began, keeping his head lowered.

"Ulrich Stern."

"Yumi Ishiyama."

"Aelita...Stones."

"Odd Della Robbia."

Roger Crane seemed satisfied. "Well done kids. Now, let's put together the full story of how you came to be here. And above all else I want to know about this credit card addressed to one Jean-Pierre Delmas."

When they had finished the story the policeman remained silent for a while. When he eventually spoke there were no reproachful tones in his voice. But the intent could be felt

powerfully, like a stab to the chest. "Do you know what it's called, what you've committed?"

Jeremy muttered something.

"I didn't hear that, you'll have to speak up."

"Theft."

"Correct. And do you believe that's something admirable?"

"No Sir. I made a mistake and I'm ashamed of it."

"I'd very much hope so" Roger the officer reaffirmed. He stretched his legs and put his feet up on the desk. One of the mountains of paperwork fell onto the floor, but the young man seemed unconcerned. Then someone knocked on the office door and, an instant later, another man let himself in. He was the spitting image of the police officer, but was several years younger and had long hair, partially hidden by a comical green hat fitted with a visor. His face was softened by a good-natured expression. "Roger..." he greeted.

"René..."

The newcomer looked towards the group. "Do you still have much to do?"

"Honestly bro, I couldn't say."

"Well I wanted to let you know that I'm heading off. I thought you wanted a lift to Ma's house by tomorrow morning..."

Roger Crane checked the time. "It is pretty late."

He drummed a pencil on the surface of the desk. Then he thoughtfully regarded the five youths.



♦ A BRUSH WITH THE LAW ♦

"One thing still isn't clear to me. Could you share why you took it upon yourselves to make such a long train journey? And at night no less!"

"It was my fault" Aelita stepped forward. She told them everything: that her father had died, how they'd found the sack of mortar and had chased up the building company, and had gone to visit the contractor in the hope of finding some information. She neatly skipped over all the parts concerning Lyoko and the secret room.

Roger and René Crane sat listening in fascination throughout the story.

And even if the policeman did not buy into the whole of it, he at least acted like he believed them. He took the form on which he had been scribbling on up to that point and said: "You see kids, I could now phone your parents and wake them up in the middle of the night. They will be frightened, they will be angry, and they'll wonder if they've misplaced their trust in you. And the weight of your mistakes will become their burden to bear. And that would just be the start of it, do you see? But instead, you've all had a good scare; you now understand what it's like to be held in a police station, and I'd hope that you've now got no desire to repeat the experience.

"Oh, absolutely not" Odd confirmed, shaking his head vigorously.

"You're all kids" René Crane ruled. "And kids do stupid things. When we were your age, we did the same."



Roger shot a reproachful glance at his brother, but his eyes were smiling. "So, I've had an idea."

"And that is?"

"To put it short, this one time, I'll let you go, and so spare your poor parents multiple cardiac arrests. But, in two days time I'll contact the principal of your school, inform him that we're concerned about fraudsters in the area, and will ask him to check his credit cards. If the money has been returned to his account before that time, then there's been no theft and we can all rest easy. But if not..." He looked at Jeremy and added: "Well, if your friend here is clever enough with computers to withdraw money from an educational account without being detected, then I'm sure he knows how to pay it back in as well."

"I'll do it first thing tomorrow morning, sirs."

"Alright then. Now hit the road and get out of here. I don't want to see any more of you. Skedaddle!"

The group remained immobile, standing on their feet in the centre of the room.

"I said shoo!"

Now it was Ulrich who chose to speak for the group: "Umm, there's just one small problem, Officer. How...how do we, now, get ourselves home?"

"Ah yes" admitted Crane. "You've now missed the last train. And, of course, you can't make the trip on foot..."



♦ A BRUSH WITH THE LAW ♦

He tapped momentarily on the top of the desk. Then he looked towards his brother, who was still waiting expectantly. "What do you say?"

"I say we deliver them with the post."

The station car park was illuminated by street lamps that cast yellow-orange cones of light on the thin mantle of snow.

Roger Crane had stamped his timecard, changed clothes, and was now wearing a pair of velvet trousers and a thick overcoat. Despite this he still managed to convey the serious attitude of a policeman, and Jeremy now understood what books meant when they described someone as having "the face of a cop."

"Evening, officer" greeted a taxi-driver who was smoking a cigarette and leaning on the door of his car while waiting for a fare

"Hi Tom."

"What's the deal with these kids then? Have you arrested them? Are they beginning their sentences, eh?" Tom chortled.

"Actually, these are highly dangerous criminals. I'm transporting them to be incarcerated in the cooler."

"Ha, ha! On a night like this, it's hardly necessary!"

Roger Crane led on, rotating his position among the five youths. Then the headlights of a large van cut through the night as it pulled up a short distance from them. The imposing vehicle was coloured a dirty white. Along the sides, in



complicated serif font characters, was written: *THE INVES-TIGATOR*.

"But that's one of our city's newspapers!" Yumi said, recognising it.

Crane nodded. "Yes, but they print it here. And my brother is one of the drivers who deliver fresh editions to the newsagents. This is his van...your passage home."

"Great!"

"We'll arrive in the city around five in the morning."

"What do you mean by 'we'll arrive?" asked Ulrich.

Officer Crane yawned. "I'm coming too. I promised my mother that I would drop in and say hello to her."

René jumped down from the van. "You kids, I'm sorry to say, will have to be comfortable with riding in the back with the newspapers. There's only room for one of you in the cab.

The van's back doors opened, revealing pile upon pile of fresh daily newspapers. The *INVESTIGATOR* heading printed on each copy in large red characters was still damp. A political cartoon featuring the caricature of a local politician dominated the front pages.

"So you'll have plenty to read along the way" René smiled. "Even though it will be pretty dark. And cold, I'm afraid. But if you tell each other some stories, I'm sure time will pass by much quicker. So, which of you will ride up front with me and Roger? One of the girls, perhaps?"

There was a flash of light in Aelita's eyes. "No thank you, I'm more interested in the stories" she answered hurriedly.



♦ A BRUSH WITH THE LAW ♦

"Well" commented René. "Stories are the best things in life. Do you want to come then?" he said to Yumi. "I understand that my brother is not the best of company, but I'm nice enough. And it's warmer in the cab."

Yumi laughed. "Gladly, thank you!"

"We're agreed then. The stowaways with the newspapers, and the girl up front. We're set."

But Yumi had to endure Roger recounting to his brother the entire story of the pedantic conductor, which René still didn't know about. Seated in the van's passenger compartment between the two brothers, she became more and more ashamed. The windscreen wipers flicked back-and-forth, brushing ribbons of light on the glass. They were merging with the autoroute, the northbound motorway.

"I'll confide a secret in you" whispered Roger in the tones of an accomplice. "My brother is a great thriller writer!"

"Really, are you serious?" Now Yumi was genuinely interested.

René shook his head, embarrassed. "Let's just say that I'm working on it. But, if you're really interested, I can say that in my next book the murderer is a printer, one of the people who publish the daily newspapers.

"Are you just messing with me?" asked Yumi distrustfully.

"I would never allow myself! Here, I'll describe the first scene: a beautiful young woman meets this stranger, the printer, in a bar. He takes her to see the place where he



works. And there's these gigantic machines right? They receive from computers all the data of the articles they are to print, and then snorting and puffing, they set themselves into motion. Great rollers start turning with monstrous strength. At a certain point, the girl tells the printer that she would love to end up on the front page. He gives her a push and she does indeed, end on the front page. You understand?"

"Brrrrr" commented Yumi.

"René, I think this Little Miss has gone through quite enough emotional stress for today" commented Roger, smiling. "Moving along, I found the information you were asking me for."

"Perfect. Fire away."

"Well I've discovered that there's an entire science devoted to different invisible inks" Roger continued. "From the classic lemon juice, to complex chemical compounds. Anyway, in the police archives I found an interesting example that you could use in the final scene..."

"Brilliant" René exulted.

"Ok, have you ever heard of Potassium Ferrocyanide?" René put a piece of chewing gum in his mouth and passed the pack to Yumi. "No, explain."

"You create an eight percent solution of Ferrocyanide, and then you bathe the tip of a pen in it and write with it on a sheet of normal white paper. The writing will be perfectly invisible, but if you then paint the sheet with a solution of iron

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nitrate then... bam! The letters will appear, one by one, in a delicate pale blue colour.

"That's just perfect big brother."

"Yeah, it seems like it was quite a popular method a few years back. It's simple to prepare, and iron nitrate is quite common."

Yumi's head had begun to bob sleepily. The cab of the van was quite warm, and the conversation was somewhat over her head. And it was very late at night. Almost without realising it, the girl closed her eyes and slipped into a restless sleep.

Initially they had thought that riding in the cargo compartment of a van would be quite poetic. After two minutes, it was still poetic but somewhat uncomfortable. After another ten, they understood that this would be a hellish journey.

The columns of stacked newspapers took up all the available space and, even if they cleared an area towards the back, bone-freezing draughts were entering under the closed loading doors. Besides, the fresh ink was staining their hands and clothes, and the smell of it was strong enough to stifle their breathing. Odd already had the word *INVESTIGA-TOR* imprinted on his jacket and trousers.

There were no seats. Every pothole caused the group to start and jolted them from side to side.

"What a journey" Odd lamented to himself for the millionth time. "And here was me hoping to catch forty winks."

Ulrich was almost invisible in the gloom. "I'm just thanking our lucky stars that things have gone this well."

"Yes" Aelita concurred. "It was lucky that Crane's brother arrived when he did: he was able to disperse some of the tension."

"It's all my fault" apologised Jeremy, also for the millionth time.

Another pothole. They lost their balance and fell against a column of papers that reached as high as the roof plating. It took several minutes to restore order.

"I hope no-one else ever learns about this" Ulrich sighed. "Oh certainly not."

"Our epic journey will forever remain a secret, I swear it!" "Me too."

After some time Odd added: "You know, sleeping like this really is impossible. We'd be better off taking advantage of this to finish our video diary."

"That's what I was hoping you would say" admitted Aelita. "I've got a sense that there are still things that I need to know."

Jeremy fussed with his jacket and managed to extract the camcorder. He turned it on and the inbuilt screen shone blue for a moment in the dark. He shook his head. "We won't be able to film anything in here. It doesn't have infrared capacity!"

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"That's no loss" consoled Ulrich. "The audio will be enough. And the important thing is that it will help us pass the time."

"The *important thing* is that you tell me everything, every detail" corrected Aelita. "So, what happened after you brought me back into the real world?"

17

SOMETHING IN THE MIND

(CITY OF THE IRON TOWER, FRANCE, SOME TIME AGO)

They began a short while after the scanners had rematerialised Aelita into the real world. The strongest of headaches, taking her by surprise and leaving her breathless. Literally, breathless!

The cause of these headaches was incomprehensible, and yet at the same time, utterly simple: Aelita was still connected somehow or other to the virtual world of Lyoko. It still retained one trace of her.

A painful memory.

This inexplicable connection had been made dramatically evident when they had tried to extinguish the supercomputer: Aelita had collapsed onto the floor, senseless.

Lifeless.

"Back on! Jeremy, turn the computer back on!" they had shouted in the darkness of the factory's underground installation.

Once again, Jeremy pushed the master switch down into its 'on' position. And on that day they understood a simple truth: the supercomputer could not be shut down. Because killing its power, would also kill Aelita.

He had turned the issue over and over in his mind. Eventually he had concluded that the root of the problem lay in the girl's modified memory sectors which he himself had deleted to allow her to escape Lyoko. An unbreakable connection, and a problem too complex for him to overcome.

And then there was X.A.N.A. Even if they still did not understand who or what it was, beyond the fact that it was unpredictable and malicious, Jeremy had begun to suspect that the connection between Aelita and Lyoko was somehow related to X.A.N.A.'s existence.

But there were still too many mysteries, too many questions without answers. And a malignant, throbbing presence that overshadowed them and denied them a peaceful night's sleep.

Up until that evening.

The evening when everything changed.

The cursor on Jeremy's computer monitor suddenly started moving by itself. One letter at a time, a word appeared.

And then it formed a sentence.

I'VE FINALLY FOUND YOU.

The boy stared wide-mouthed at the chat window that had appeared on the screen. For a moment he was uncertain of what he should do next, until his curiosity got the better of him. Nervously, he began to run his fingers over the keys.

Who are you?

I AM FRANZ HOPPER.

Jeremy started. It can't be...

He felt a cold shiver of terror run down the length of his back.

What if this was actually X.A.N.A. he was in contact with? The artificial intelligence seemed obsessed with anything relating to Aelita and her father, his creator. Jeremy remained frozen, his fingers poised over the keyboard.

I AM NOT X.A.N.A. I CAN PROVE IT. ASK ME ANYTHING YOU LIKE. SUBJECT ME TO THE TURING TEST.

Jeremy read the new message, petrified. It seemed as if whoever was writing to him could read his thoughts...

He did not know how to react, or even if he should.



One was forced to reflect. What did they actually know about X.A.N.A.? That it was an artificial entity from an artificial world. And that it could take control of access towers and so connect to electronic equipment in the real world. So maybe, it could also travel through the Internet...

Why not? Perhaps X.A.N.A. had access to every databank and database in the world. It could obtain any scientific text, elaborate strategies and perform calculations at the speed of light...

Perhaps.

Or maybe all Jeremy had to do was shut his computer down. Just close the chat window and go to bed.

LISTEN TO ME. IN WHAT WAY IS A PLUMBER LIKE A DOCTOR? BOTH BURY THEIR MISTAKES.

DO I LOOK LIKE X.A.N.A. TO YOU? WOULD IT EVER TELL A JOKE? HONESTLY, IT HAS NO SENSE OF HUMOUR!

Jeremy smiled.

Neither do you. Your joke is terrible!

ON THIS I CONCEDE TO YOUR LOGIC.

Why did you contact me?

WE MUST DELETE IT.



Delete what?

X.A.N.A.

Jeremy shook his head, more and more confused.

But who is X.A.N.A.?

This time he had to wait several seconds for the answer.

THE ENEMY.

Spaghetti bolognaise was perhaps the worst food to ever come out of Kadic's kitchens. Rosa, the lunch lady, was a good cook, but pasta was definitely not her strong suit: the spaghetti always ended up clumping together in a shapeless sticky heap, while the meat sauce was too wet and quickly percolated through to the bottom of the plate, forming a small red lake of indefinable flavour.

Despite this, Odd had cheerfully devoured his portion and quickly appropriated those of Yumi and Aelita.

"You're disgusting Odd" commented Ulrich.

"That's what you always say: 'Odd, you're disgusting; Odd, you're like a pigsty...' The truth is that I can't stand to see food go to waste."



"Have any of you seen Jeremy?" Yumi asked, changing the subject.

"No. He's not attended classes today."

"I saw him this morning" Aelita added. "He was working on his computer."

Odd sucked avidly at a skein of matted pasta as big as a rugby ball, shaking his head. "He's going to make himself ill if he keeps this up."

At that moment, William Dunbar appeared at the bottom of the table and approached them, a dinner tray in his hands. "Mind if I sit?"

Ulrich did not deign so much as to look up from his plate. "Much as it displeases me, I suspect your being here is not an accident."

"Why's that? You guys need the space to sit and share the secrets of your little exclusive club with yourselves?"

"Maybe."

William looked about ready to hurl the contents of his tray all over Ulrich, but he restrained himself. "Have it your way then! I think I've lost my appetite anyway."

At that instant, Aelita's phone started ringing. "What did you say? What? My father? Jeremy...this isn't funny!"

But it was no joke.

Aelita, Ulrich, Yumi and Odd materialised onto Lyoko for what was to be the last time. An elf, a samurai, a Japanese geisha and a catboy with a long purple tail. For Aelita, return-



ing to the virtual world felt like a cold shower. She was not alone in this feeling.

They were in the ice sector. In front of them the diamond-coloured plain rose into a mountain, its snowy peaks inter-connected with crystal bridges. From the highest peak, a cascade of water fell in a silvery shower of rain, pooling at the bottom in a sparkling little lake.

The sensation of being in a false reality was even stronger here than usual: the icy white surfaces showed no reflections. The group's shadows gave the impression that they were walking several centimetres above the ground.

"Where's my father?" demanded Aelita, looking around herself.

"Hiding somewhere in the vicinity of the waterfall" Jeremy's voice answered within their ears. "But don't expect to recognise him easily. He has informed me that he has not taken a human form."

"This smells like a trap to me" Ulrich hissed. "I've got an ugly feeling that X.A.N.A. is behind it."

"That's why we're here as well" Yumi expounded. "Aelita won't be in any danger if we stick with her."

In the control room under the old factory, Jeremy bit his lip. In his heart he hoped that Yumi was right. But the truth was, as always, that Aelita was risking more than anyone else. Even after rematerialisation, she still did not possess any life points.

But he remained silent.



The troupe moved towards the waterfall, which was pouring onto the little lake, creating a thin and intangible mist.

The lake, its surface as smooth as a metal plate, could only be crossed by a little bridge that disappeared under the vertical column of falling water.

Odd set off across it first. Although gallons of water were pouring out from the mountain every second, he could not hear any noise. An eerie silence had settled across the ice.

"What's behind the waterfall Jeremy?"

"The fifth sector. The core of Lyoko."

"The one without a name?"

"Right, the one without a name."

"And what's in there...in the core of Lyoko?"

"I haven't the least idea."

"Well let's go. Stay on your guard guys."

About halfway across the bridge, Aelita stopped. "You wait here. I must go on alone."

"Have you lost your marbles?"

Aelita shook her head. "It's my father that's over there."

"We're not one hundred percent sure of that" Ulrich insisted.

"No, I can feel it's him. And if that's the case...it might be better if we could speak in private."

Yumi nodded. "She's right boys. It's her life. This is her moment."

Aelita smiled, grateful. Then she turned to advance alone across the bridge, one step in front of another, while the oth-

er three watched her go, standing their ground with their weapons in hand.

When Aelita was almost right under the fall she braced herself for the spray, but felt nothing. The water droplets were landing on her skin for a moment and then sliding off without wetting it.

They were only an illusion.

Hidden behind the waterfall was a low-ceilinged cave, its floor submerged under the waters of the lake. The bridge described a great arch over the silvery liquid.

And there, at the highest point, hovering in mid-air over the surface of the lake, there was a bright sphere. Aelita could not take her eyes off it, enchanted. It seemed to be *alive*: whirls and eddies of light pulsed within it, followed by millions of tiny explosions in all the colours of the rainbow.

"Aelita". The sphere had spoken her name.

Aelita recognised that voice in an instant.

Unable to hold back her emotions, she ran up to the edge of the bridge and stretched out her arm to try and touch it, but the sphere remained at an unreachable distance, a few centimetres beyond her fingertips.

"My little girl...you've grown so much. I am so very proud of you."

"Daddy..." Virtual tears, cold and tasteless, were running down the elf's face.

"I wish that we had more time, my treasure" continued the sphere. "Time to explain things. Time for us. But time is a luxury I can't afford. He is coming."

"X.A.N.A..."

"It's a threat to us all. We must destroy it."

The girl nodded. "We'll do it together, Daddy..."

"I know we will. But it won't be easy. It will do everything in its power to stop us."

"Daddy...I've missed you so much."

"And I you, my little dear. You can't imagine how much. Every moment since I was forced to leave you on your own, all these years I've done nothing but think of you and your mother Anthea. And our...family."

Aelita was there, immersed in that unreal and aseptic environment, and with a knot in her throat that she hoped would never thaw.

The being in front of her was only a sphere of light, but that voice...that warm, resounding voice, that was the voice of her father. And it had just spoken the name of her mother.

A part of her wanted to scream: *Daddy, please come and hug me! Who cares about X.A.N.A. and all the rest of it! I need you!*

But another part of her had to know.

"Daddy? Where is my mother?" she asked, her voice thin and weak.

"I don't know, my darling. But she is alive, and you must search for her. I've left something for you in the Hermitage. It's hidden well, but I'm certain that you can find it."

"Why can't we find it together, Daddy?"

"Because I myself no longer know where it is, not anymore. As time has gone by I have had to forget certain memories, so that he might not possess them."

At a stroke, the sphere started and began to rotate on itself as its internal currents intensified.

"X.A.N.A.!" it murmured. "He's noticed us."

In the supercomputer's great control hall, Jeremy was sat immobile in front of the main screen, his hands resting on the keyboard. Around him the hall was immersed in darkness, illuminated at intervals by flickering bursts of bright light and inscriptions that caught fire and died like flashes of lightening. Jeremy would have preferred to not have eavesdropped on that long conversation. But the monitor showed him everything that took place on Lyoko, and in any case the supercomputer transmitted every uttered word and sigh directly to him.

He was so absorbed in his thoughts that he did not notice a shadow moving furtively behind him, approaching his position at the workstation.

Nor did he see a hand rise up behind his shoulders, clench in a fist, and then beat down on his fair-haired head.

He collapsed to the floor, unconscious.



William Dunbar, their schoolmate, the boy of whom Ulrich was so jealous, looked down at him with a satisfied air, and smiled.

Around the frozen lake the air suddenly seemed to become charged with electricity. From behind a spur of ice X.A.N.A.'s monsters appeared in their hundreds, like a swarm of maddened insects.

Yumi was the first to see them. "Over there!" she cried. "I said it was a trap!" yelled Ulrich.

In a flash the team was submerged in a rain of laser bolts. Yumi threw her fans but the number of enemies was too great.

She was struck tens of times and dissolved into a puff of blue pixels.

She re-emerged from the scanner column panting.

"Jeremy?" she asked, catching her breath. "How are the others doing?"

But from the virtualisation room's loudspeakers there was no response.

Yumi ascended to the level and called him again. "Jeremy?"

Her friend was sprawled on the ground; his glasses lay beside him with their legs bent upwards, forlornly twisted. William Dunbar was sitting at the control console, his fingers moving rapidly across the keyboard.



"What have you done here?" Yumi cried, horrified. "How could you do this to...?"

Very slowly, William turned to face her. "Hello, my treasure" he croaked. His fascinatingly dark eyes had vanished. In their place, two unnatural fires burned with a blue light.

They were the eyes of X.A.N.A.

"Oh, no, William...no!"

Yumi was given no opportunity to try to understand how this had happened. Out of the boy's throat there came a howling scream devoid of any humanity. William leapt from the armchair and charged her so quickly that she had no time to react, seizing her by her T-shirt. Yumi was flung across the room.

Her back slammed against the wall with such force that all the air was knocked out of her lungs, leaving her breathless.

After several seconds she achingly rose to her feet. She aimed for the doors of the lift and threw herself in that direction, faster than she believed possible.

"Jeremy!" she cried.

One of the hands of the boy sprawled on the floor was moving weakly, probing across the floor in search of his glasses.

Yumi did not stop.

She was not exactly sure of what she was doing. But she knew that she had to get William out of that room.

Inside Lyoko, in the ice sector, Odd and Ulrich reacted in surprise, as the monsters appeared to retreat, flowing back behind the mountains from which they had appeared only a few minutes beforehand.

"Aha!" Odd exulted. "Look, we've routed them, they're trying to escape!"

"I don't think they're escaping from us. They easily outnumbered us."

"So what then?"

"Well, it seems like it might be a strategic retreat. Or..."

At that moment, the side of the mountain began to tremble unexpectedly.

Then the shock transferred into the ground, and the ice beside them split apart, carving out a deep crack. The flow of water over the falls dramatically increased in intensity for several seconds and then slowed down abruptly, reduced to a mere trickle of drips.

The world of Lyoko started vibrating before their eyes, and the sensation of dizziness created by the virtual environment struck home with far more force than usual.

"Do you think that Aelita needs our help?" asked Odd.

"I don't know about her, but we certainly do."

"Why's that?"

"Look there!" Ulrich indicated.

From behind the ice spires a gigantic creature had emerged.



It was tall enough to be able to cross the entire mountain in a single stride. Its head was a white mask marked with a single eye. From the skull there sprouted black tentacles that resembled writhing dreadlocks. The colossus had human form, but the dimensions were incredible.

It launched a punch against the flank of the mountain: a huge fragment of ice sheared off from the summit and crashed down into the lake, further widening the crevice that had been formed shortly beforehand.

"Oh, crap..." murmured Odd, feeling his knees begin to tremble.

"Odd, Ulrich!" Aelita's voice drew their attention.

The girl was running along the ice bridge towards them, followed by a sphere of light that floated in the air behind her. She reached them in a few seconds.

"This is my father" she said, indicating to the sphere.

"Oh, good day...Mister Hopper" Odd greeted him politely. He had never before had the opportunity to converse with a...kind of novelty chandelier. "Am I right in hoping that you can...help us beat that giant monster?"

"Perhaps" answered the sphere, leaving Odd and Ulrich with their mouths hanging open.

"But it is something that we must do together."

"How?"

"I was hoping that Jeremy would have told you."

"Yeah well, he's not been saying much of late."



The colossus took an immense leap forward. The impact of its huge feet on the ice was devastating: the crack became a chasm that ran between the legs of the giant. It raised its arms towards the sky. A moment later, it brought its fists down and struck them against the ground, throwing up a wave of silver water that abruptly transformed and dissipated into a dense vapour.

"Follow me!" said the sphere. "It wants to prevent Aelita from being materialised!"

"You go Odd!" Ulrich twirled his katana: the blade whistled through the air, casting reflections of blue light. "I'll try to distract it somehow!"

"Let's roll Mister Hopper" yelled Odd, turning to the sphere. "Wherever you go, we'll follow!"

The colossus unleashed another fist, and this blow drove the chasm as far as the lake, which trembled in protest as its waters began to drain away, spilling into the digital void that lurked beneath Lyoko.

The sphere dived into the chasm, followed by Odd and Aelita.

They landed immediately on a square platform of smooth rock, suspended in an endless abyss.

On the computer display under the old factory, superimposed over the core sector of Lyoko, which up to this point had remained blank, a name appeared.

CARTHAGE

It was the name of a city.

A city without dimensions, composed of an infinite number of blue blocks and smooth, regular surfaces, each aligned and arranged beside the others with an almost painful, frightening precision.

Hundreds of manta monsters were darting in each direction, gliding in the digital sky on great fins shaped like wings.

They each had a long snout with two little mobile horns and a wide, flat, milky body. As soon as they noticed the intruders they screeched an acute cry and began to converge on their position, firing clouds of lasers upon them.

Odd, Aelita and the sphere escaped under the crossfire, while the city of blue blocks seemed to infinitely shift and reconfigure itself beneath them. They found a second platform, and then a third, and ran at breakneck speed until they ran out of walkway.

There was nowhere else to go.

It was if they had arrived, simultaneously, at both the centre and the outer edge of the city.

In front of them there materialised an undulating display, frameless.

"It's up to you now Aelita! You must install the program!" the sphere ordered from behind their backs.

"Which program?"

"Jeremy knows."



"Jeremy! Send me the data! Jeremy!!" she screamed, raising her eyes to the sky.

But there was no answer.

Odd was vaulting back and forth on his agile legs, his outstretched wrists firing laser arrows in all directions in a desperate attempt to protect the girl. Fortunately the monsters were seemingly ignoring the two children, and were concentrating all their efforts on the sphere, which floated immobile in the air attracting swarms of the creatures like flies.

Little by little their numbers were growing.

"Jeremy!" Aelita screamed again in despair. "I need the program! PLEASE NOW!"

"Here...here I am" murmured Jeremy's voice, as if reemerging from beyond the brink of the abyss.

"Where the heck have you been??"

"There's been some...complications. William..."

"This isn't the time for a chat!" Odd screamed. "Jeremy, send this damn program! And you, Mister Hopper, you've got to get away from here, you're too easy a target!"

"The program!" replied the sphere. "Don't worry about me! Think of the program!"

Aelita placed her hands on the screen and within a few seconds she had loaded the software sent by Jeremy onto Lyoko's memory.

"That's it!" she announced eventually, lift her hands away. But things were not going to be so easy. The girl examined the fluctuating screen. "I've installed the program onto the



system Jeremy, but it won't run! It's giving me an error message!"

"It's not an error" the boy stated. "The supercomputer doesn't have enough processing power to execute the program."

"So can you explain me what purpose installing it served?" screamed Odd, who was still fighting furiously against multiple flying mantas. He was exhausted, like they all were. They were pitting themselves against an indomitable force, potentially infinite. "Where can we get additional power from?"

"Me" said the sphere. "You can get additional processor capacity from me."

Yumi was on the old factory's first floor, at the point where the metal balcony passed through the entryway onto the iron suspension bridge.

The situation could not be described as cheerful, not at all. William was acting like a madman. And he was now superhumanly strong.

While she ran along the factory's iron balconies, Yumi could feel the fear pressing in on her. Here in reality, she had no life points, nor her razor-sharp tessen fans. What's more she was still hurting badly from being thrown against the wall: another blow like that would definitely knock her out.

She could not fight him. But she could try to keep him away from the control room.

And in the meantime, she could try to survive.



She slipped between two bulkheads covered in rust, alert to any suspicious sound or movement.

But evidently, not alert enough.

William came out of nowhere, like a ghost, and grabbed her by the base of the neck.

Yumi tried to wriggle free, but her tennis shoes slid on the cement floor without finding purchase. Her hands groped for something. "Help" she whispered weakly.

Holding her by the throat, William drew her to him, ready to hurl her against one of the factory's brick walls. Then, he seemed to change his mind. His face contracted into a derisive sneer. His eyes, in which the X.A.N.A. symbol shone, flickered as if due to interference.

Yumi felt him lift her upwards and realised that her shoes were no longer touching the ground. William swung her towards the gap, over the balcony's railing.

It was at least a five metre drop.

He was going to throw her down.

Odd had learned that there was a limit for everything. By himself, for example, he could go head-to-head with three or four monsters. But not a hundred.

He leapt onto the back of a passing manta, seized it by the horns and led it upwards, to where thousands of the monsters were crowding round Hopper.



The manta swerved, trying to throw him, but Odd braced his feet and refused to let go of his catch. "You damned monster" he cried.

Forcing it to rear up, he managed to take out a second and then a third monster. Then he saw only the first glimmer of a laser-bolt as it was fired and struck him right between the eyes.

Wham!

A mechanical door slid to one side and Odd found himself in the scanner hall. "Yumi? Jeremy?" he panted distraughtly.

"Odd, are you back?" It was Jeremy's voice. He seemed frightened. "Run, quick! Yumi's on the level above me, and William Dunbar's there with her."

"William...Dunbar? And what's he doing here?"

"It's not really William! It's X.A.N.A.! And he's trying to kill her!"

"Oh, shit."

Odd sprang forward, not needing to say anything else. His heart was beating in his chest to an infernal rhythm, but he tried to ignore the deafening throbs. He staggered across to the lift, called it, and then pressed the red button that would take him up to the factory's ground floor.

Up he went.

Once above, he tried to make sense of where he needed to go. Disorientated he looked around, retching at the stale odour of the dust.

Then he heard something. A low moan. In the corner of his eye he glimpsed a movement, and turned to look in that direction: William was standing atop a scaffold. He was holding onto something, dangling it over the chasm...hey, wait a moment! That was Yumi!

"NO!" Odd cried instinctively.

William saw him, directed a sadistic smile at him, and then let go of Yumi. Without thinking, Odd threw himself into a leap and dived in that direction.

On the fringe of the frozen lake, which by now had decompiled into myriad fragments of code, Ulrich was still sparring with the colossus. More accurately, he was running away from the monster with his tail between his legs. But that strategy did not seem to be working, he had to come up with something as soon as possible. He decided to crouch down amid the broken ice that surrounded him, waiting expectantly. Then he felt the heavy, resounding steps of the colossus, made a prodigious forward bound and forcefully drove his sword into the back of the monster's foot. Using the weapon as a handhold he allowed himself to be carried along. The giant seemed unperturbed: it completed its step and shattered the last remnants of the silver lake.

Ulrich clung to the hilt of the sword with all his strength.

He managed to free the blade from the foot of the giant and jumped up again. This time he transfixed the sword in the centre of the monster's thigh. He went up again. In this



manner he continued his climb, up as far as the beltline. Here the slope became more difficult: the torso of the colossus was like a great inverted shelf, impossible to scale.

Instead he waited until the giant's arm swung forward and then made a calculated jump to land on its gigantic hand, managing to plant his sword in one of the huge fingertips. At that point the monster, which up to this moment had not even noticed his presence, reacted. The hand moved with incredible speed and the boy had to slip into the hollow between its index and middle fingers to avoid being squashed.

He realised that he had few options available to himself without external aid. "Jeremy" he implored. "Do you read me? Jeremy!"

"I'm here!" Jeremy screamed in Ulrich's ears, a moment before the colossus again tried to crush him against the ground. This was not going well. This was really not going well!

"Jeremy! Do something!"

"I can't do anything! Unless...can you ride a motorbike?" "JEREMY!"

Next to him, in the huge monster's palm, a little digital motorcycle appeared. The grip had loosened enough that Ulrich was able to slip out from between the fingers; he jumped onto the motorbike, threw his weight onto his wrists and hit the accelerator. He rose along the slope of the thumb and dived into the gap beyond the nail. Now the climbing

began again. The forearm. The elbow, dark and coloured like scorched iron. The curve of the bicep.

Now the colossus was behaving like a person trying to swat a gnat. But instead of slowing down, Ulrich sped up further. The shoulder. The neck. At this point he folded up on the motorbike and released himself to spring upwards towards the white mask that shielded the face of the monster...

...which at that moment dipped and presented its single eye to him: the eye of X.A.N.A.

Reacting, Ulrich drew his katana while still in mid-air. He rotated his arm and with every ounce of his strength drove the point of the katana into the black centre of that horrible symbol.

Ulrich's sword was like a pinprick to the giant. Nevertheless it wavered...

Hanging from the katana by both his arms Ulrich tried to keep his focus, to maintain his grip, his teeth gritted. He pulled himself up and around with the strength in his arms, until his feet were supported against the smooth surface of the mask. Then, he pushed the katana in up to the hilt.

The colossus felt that blow. It swerved sharply to one side and Ulrich found himself hurled into the air, a broken half of his sword in hand, falling towards the ground. He curled up into a ball, did a somersault and landed on his feet.

The violence of the impact caused his teeth to snap together with enough force that for a moment Ulrich thought they had broken.

But instead, he found himself to be completely whole. Including his teeth.

He had no time to express his amazement: quivering rabidly, the monster collapsed on him. And disintegrated him.

"Mister Hopper" called Jeremy from his station. "We need that processing power, right now."

"I am ready Jeremy" announced the sphere. "The last port is open."

"Daddy...what do you mean?" begged Aelita. "What power are you talking about?"

She was still on the platform surrounded by the mantas. She was tense with the effort of holding them back, having discovered she could project offensive energy fields from her hands, and now she was firing them off at a rate even she found impossible to believe, filling the surrounding space with pink iridescence.

There was no-one else present, apart from her and the sphere.

"We don't have any time left, my dear" her father coaxed her. "Touch me, and give me access to the program." The sphere fluttered towards the display, heedless of the monsters and their lasers. His surface was a deeper colour now, and the liquid currents underneath were becoming agitated and violent.

"No!" Aelita protested. "You have to tell me what will happen to you afterwards!"



"Aelita, STOP IT! Don't be foolish! Now touch me!"

The girl lowered her hands and stepped back. The mantas showered down a hail of lasers on the sphere, while the light inside grew darker and darker, until it became a deep and midnight black.

"Hopper! Aelita! Your program is losing stability! There's only forty percent left!" Jeremy calculated, fearful. "Thirty...twenty..."

Aelita approached her father. "Daddy, don't go..." she murmured, crying.

A manta fired off another shot and she hesitated, seemingly losing consistency. Then she leant against the sphere with the whole of her body. She embraced her father. For a moment, she felt between her arms a person of flesh and blood.

"Aelita!" Jeremy cried. "Mister Hopper!"

The sphere dissipated. No explosions, no noise.

As if it had never existed.

A dense wave of liquid energy poured through the city of Carthage. And then, it spread to the other sectors of Lyoko, flowing in each direction. An unstoppable tide. It flooded the mountains, the digital trees, the rocks of the desert sector and the frozen lakes. It was a tidal wave that was hunting X.A.N.A. down, following its tracks and traces. The white liquid became a mass of tentacles that were released in search of new fragments, possible new hiding places.

All the Lyoko monsters, as soon as they were touched by the liquid or the tentacles, dissolved one by one into colourful bubbles.

But they were unimportant, only the little fishes. When it was finally overcome by the sea of energy, X.A.N.A. let loose a scream of rage and frustration, while his digital body was destroyed piece by piece.

In the old factory, William too let out a howl of pain, bending over until he was doubled in on himself. His head tipped towards the ceiling and from his wide open mouth there gushed a dense smoke, black as pitch, which twisted into wide circular coils, before disappearing into nothingness.

William Dunbar fainted.

Several metres beneath him, Odd was holding Yumi gripped in his arms: he had managed to save her at the last second, breaking her fall with his own body, after William had hurled her down from the scaffold.

"Are you alright?" he asked her.

"Yes, and you?"

Odd nodded, laughing. "Aside from a few dents and bruises: you should consider going on a diet."

Odd, Yumi, Ulrich and Jeremy. They all stood firm, in silence, in the scanner room. They were waiting for the doors of the final booth to open and return Aelita to them. Jeremy's heart was hammering in his chest and behind the thick lenses of his glasses his eyes were red with emotion.

And finally, there she was.

Aelita staggered out of the scanner. She looked at them one by one, and then took a step towards Jeremy, her face scoured by tears.

"He's...dead, isn't he? My father..."

Nobody answered her.

Instead, the four children drew near to her, all together, and wrapped her in a silent hug.

18

THE SECRET ROOM

(CITY OF THE IRON TOWER, FRANCE, JANUARY 10TH)



Jeremy paused his account of the story to embrace Aelita, who was weeping softly, leaning against the stacks of newspapers piled high in the back of the van.

"Be strong" he whispered. "Don't cry. Don't cry..."

When she had gathered herself, Aelita pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and used it to blow her nose and dry her damp eyes. "Thanks guys" she murmured. "I love you."

They remained in silence for a short while, listening to the dull roar of the van.

"Is there anything else that I should know?" Aelita asked them eventually.

"Only that" Jeremy started. "Some weeks ago..."

"We went back to the supercomputer hall" Odd said.

"We'd talked about it, as a group, and thought about the secrets we shared" added Ulrich.

"But also of the dangers that had been posed to us. X.A.N.A. had tried to kill us, then what with William, and your father..."

"We'd come to understand that what we had taken for a giant video game was more than that..."

"That it in fact, had repercussions for the entire world. For reality."

"And so we decided we had to turn it off, shut down the supercomputer."

"It was you who did it in the end, Aelita."

"You were the single one with the right to do it, or so your father had explained it to us. You went up to the master switch alone, with us standing behind you..."

"And then you said: 'My father would have wanted it this way' and pulled the lever."

"And then we went back to my bedroom" Jeremy concluded. "We also dismantled my laptop, the one with which I was remotely accessing the factory computer..."

"We shut the pieces in his wardrobe."

"Like he said."

"And that was the end of it."

"It wasn't like I needed access to the supercomputer anyway, though it would have been useful for buying the train tickets..." Jeremy said, scratching his head.



"Yeah, make a note of that" Odd added. "Because next time we travel I don't want these economy seats again."

In spite of everything, in spite of the still fresh pain of certain memories, Odd's off-hand remark had a strange effect on them all.

Hesitantly, almost as if ashamed to, they began to laugh, lightly and first, then with more and more force.

And, when they stopped, they understood that that shared laughter was one of the most beautiful parts of their friendship.

Someone knocked on the van's loading door.

"Hey, you guys! You alright in there?"

It was René Crane. They heard him fuss with the lock, and then the door opened with a click.

It was still very dark outside.

The man's jacket was covered with a thin layer of snow, and a small hurricane of tiny white flecks swirled agitatedly behind him.

Jeremy leaned out from the van and saw that further snow had settled on the street. It had to be at least thirty centimetres deep.

"Have we arrived?" he asked.

"You guys have" René answered. "But my brother and I have a bit more driving to do. And in this weather it won't be easy."

"Well, good luck to you then."



Yumi came round to the back of the van with the policeman. The girl's eyes were swollen and her face was sinking into her scarf.

"Someone's had a good sleep" commented Ulrich, affectionately tousling her hair.

The Crane brothers had dropped them off in front of Kadic Academy's main entrance: the ornate black gate itself standing firm between two pillars of red brick, and beyond it was the long driveway that cut through the grounds and led towards the school's imposing buildings, currently swallowed up in the snow and gloom.

"Can you find your way home from here?" Officer Crane asked.

"Yes thank you, our house is quite nearby" Jeremy assured him. "Less than ten minutes by foot."

"Well there's nobody out on the streets at this hour, so I doubt you'll be at any risk" the policeman concluded. "But I recommend that you don't get yourselves into trouble again."

"No sir."

"And remember that on Tuesday I'll be contacting your headmaster to ensure for myself that you've repaid the debt on his credit card."

"Yes sir."

Eventually Roger Crane smiled. "Well then Godspeed kids. And if you ever need another lift, just come find me." "Right, but not to prison!" Odd hurriedly specified.



This time they all laughed, standing next to the van in the middle of the snow that continued to fall relentlessly.

It was settling everywhere. It fell on the school, on the city's old industrial quarter beside the river. On the rusted iron bridge, and the roofs of the deserted factory that occupied the entirety of its little island.

And which silently held within it, a secret underground castle.

The children made their way slowly along, staggering drunkenly as they were assailed by the buffeting gusts of the angry, icy wind.

Eventually, Odd leaned against a mailbox and sighed.

"Guys, I don't think I can go any further. I'm hungry, cold, and above all else I'm about ready to pass out from sleep deprivation!"

"Just a little more Odd! Five minutes and we'll be at the house."

"Oh I can't wait for the moment when I can slip under a warm duvet..."

Jeremy shook his head. "You won't get the chance I'm afraid. It's five-thirty in the morning, we've only got three hours before school begins."

"So what?"

"Have you already forgotten about Mister Broulet? And the walled-up room?"

"What, you want to go looking for it...right now?!"



"Odd, I feel this is the perfect night for it" Aelita intervened. "The last night of our winter vacation."

Finally, they reached the Hermitage and waited shuddering under the porch while Aelita inserted the key and turned it in the lock. Inside the villa had conserved some of the warmth from earlier in the afternoon, even though, when they left to catch the train, the group had turned off the central heating.

"At this point I understand if sleeping is out of the question" lamented Odd. "Otherwise we won't get the chance tomorrow morning. But can we at least have something to eat? Who wants some sandwiches?"

Everyone did.

Ulrich lit the boiler and turned it up to its highest setting, and then the five of them took refuge in the kitchen. The left-overs from their dinner earlier included bread, part of an omelette, various cheeses and some chocolate spread. They were quickly plated up and within a few minutes all of their jaws were fully engaged in chewing.

"As far as this walled-up room is concerned" Jeremy said at last. "I think we should split up. Odd, Yumi and Ulrich, you guys work round the house knocking on the walls to see if you can find any that sound hollow. Aelita and myself, meanwhile, will explore the attic: if Hopper really did leave behind a map, then she's the only one of us likely to find it."

"Ok" nodded Ulrich. "And if anyone finds something, call the rest of us."

While the others began to beat against the walls with the palms of their hands, Jeremy took down the books off the highest shelf in the attic study and laid them on the floor; then he began methodically leafing through them.

Aelita meanwhile was wandering about the room. At one point, she noticed a worn-out leather case left on a shelf and said: "There really is a little bit of everything here, look. A little chemistry set, at least twenty years old!"

The she sat on the floor beside her friend and started to sort through the books with him. "Jeremy, what kind of a person was my father?" she asked eventually.

"I didn't know him as 'a person', not really."

"But he contacted you."

"Yes."

"And you worked together."

"For a short time; on the program that destroyed X.A.N.A. I would never have succeeded without him." He hesitated for a moment, and then added: "He was the most brilliant mind I've ever known. And he loved you dearly."

They continued their work in silence, eventually finishing with the books and instead searching through the magazines and periodicals. They had still found nothing useful: no notes scribbled in the margins, no suspicious pen marks, no scraps of paper slipped between the covers and the dust jackets.

Nothing upon nothing.

At the bottom of the attic stairs Ulrich's voice called up to them. "Guys, where are you? We're finished! And the result is a big fat zero, I'm sorry."

"It's the same up here. Come up and give us a hand" Jeremy proposed.

One by one the others arrived in the study. They all had distraught faces. But nobody complained and they kept on working.

"Nothing" Odd sighed at the end.

"What about that pile of magazines over there?"

"I already checked them."

The professor had done his job perfectly: if he really had left instructions as how to find the walled room, then they were extremely well hidden.

"Let's assume that we're looking for an actual map" Ulrich mused. "But if that were the case, then Professor Hopper could have hidden it anywhere. For example, on a wall that was then painted over, or in a piece of furniture, beneath a double-bottom..."

"I don't know why" interjected Aelita. "But I was convinced it would be in a book. And I can say that if I was hiding something I would have chosen to conceal it in this, 'The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe'."

"Why?"



"I'm feeling a sense of familiarity with it. Goodness knows why, perhaps my father read these stories to me when I was little."

Odd, who was the bibliophile of the group, an avid reader of fiction, replied: "I wouldn't buy that. Poe wrote gothic horror and mystery stories, hardly fit for a little girl. And on the subject of mysteries..."

"What?"

Odd took the book from Aelita and began to frenetically search through it. He checked the contents, and then turned to a specific page. "Here! Here! I just remembered it!"

Ulrich sighed in irritation. "Would you care to share your brainwave with us?"

"There's this famous short story by Poe, 'The Purloined Letter', in which the protagonist must find a precious letter hidden somewhere in a great hotel."

"Well, that sounds familiar."

"Yes: us."

"So at the end, what happens?"

"Well he eventually finds it" Odd snickered. "...in a letterbox! Don't you see? The police search for this letter for days, but the single place that they fail to check is the one that's most obvious!"

"Seems stupid to me" commented Ulrich sceptically.

Odd slammed the book shut, ran down to the ground floor, went out into the garden, checked the mailbox and returned to the attic. "Ok. That was a false lead."

Ulrich rolled his eyes at the ceiling. "I could have told you that myself" he said ironically. Then he thought aloud again in a loud voice. "Perhaps he drew it on a sheet of paper, or perhaps in one of his..."

"...notebooks" Aelita finished for him. "Like this."

From the back pocket of her jeans she drew the notebook that she had removed from Kiwi's mouth the previous afternoon, during the first search of the attic. The pages were all blank.

"But it's empty" Odd observed, disappointed.

"Maybe he drew it with invisible ink."

"Yeaaaah, like lemon juice..."

At those words, Yumi's face lit up. "Hey, wait!" she cried. "Lemon juice isn't the only kind of invisible ink that's easy to prepare. Hopper was also a science teacher, so he must have had some skill with chemistry! I wouldn't be surprised if he used potassium ferrocyanide as an invisible ink. If that's the case, all we need to reveal the secret text is some iron nitrate!"

They all turned to stare at her, their eyes wide open.

The small leather case was quickly opened out on the floor: inside were rows of test tubes full of various coloured substances, alembics and a little instruction manual.

"Much of this stuff has probably expired" Jeremy ascertained.

"Hopefully it will still work for us."



Aelita chose a test tube full of honey-coloured crystals, opened it and poured the contents onto the first page. Some damp must have penetrated the test tube, because the iron nitrate fell in a single mass onto the sheet, resting on the white page like a dense stone.

Aelita began to crumble it between her fingers, delicately rubbing it into the paper. And incredibly, one by one, letters appeared: blue letters written hastily years ago.

My little Aelita, I can only hope it is you reading this...

Recognising the handwriting of her father, Aelita suddenly felt weak. A hand went to her mouth and she sat in still silence, watching the words that had been intended for her taking shape on the sheets of the notebook.

You must go down to the basement of the Hermitage and into the refrigerator room. Once there you will see...

With her hand trembling from emotion, Aelita started scattering iron nitrate over the following pages. A little bit at a time, a stylised plan of the Hermitage appeared, together with instructions on how to access the hidden room, behind the walk-in refrigerator.

"See, I said it was in there!" Odd joked.

In total the writing spread across four pages.

At the end of the fourth there was a short final note: *I love you.*

And a signature: Daddy.

The remaining pages were blank.

Odd sprang to his feet. "Last one to the basement washes the plates!" he yelled, and then he rushed down the stairs.

The refrigerator room had no windows: it was a simple grey rectangle of thick walls, furnished with two rows of low shelves on each side.

Set into the ceiling were the open ends of the conduits that led to the refrigerant motor that cooled the environment. Mounted on the walls were big hooks for hanging meat on, but they were now empty, apart from cobwebs and dust.

Aelita opened her father's notebook and again read out the instructions he had left her: "'Standing with your back to the door, look for the third hook from the end, on the left-hand wall."

"There it is!" Ulrich indicated towards it.

"'Pull it towards you'". Ulrich climbed onto the shelving units to reach the hook and hung onto it.

They heard a loud *clang* and, with a soft *click*, the hook dropped several centimetres from its original position.

"'Now, on the right wall, count down to the fourth shelf from the top and raise it."

Odd carried the operation out, pushing the shelf in towards the wall.

"'Close the door into the room. Then reopen it and shut it again'."

"I've done it" Jeremy announced.

""Finally, pull on the hook again"."



This time as well as the click they heard a mechanical creaking, and in the far wall of the room a door opened, one so narrow and low that to pass through one would need to crawl on hands and knees.

On the other side, in a room that had been sealed for at least ten years, a light turned itself on.

They entered one at a time: first Aelita, then Jeremy, then Odd, Ulrich and Yumi. Standing, they found themselves to be in a simple room with white walls that seemed freshly plastered. From the centre of the ceiling there dangled an electrical cable, a single bulb swaying slightly at the end of it. The only furniture was a dark leather couch that had been arranged to face a cabinet resting against the opposite wall, on which a television set and a video cassette player sat. They were old models: the TV was deeper than it was wide, with a curved screen and a protruding cathode ray tube that pressed against the wall.

"Nuts!" said Odd. "This thing takes video cassettes! What a museum piece!"

Jeremy smiled. "This room was sealed before DVD technology was invented."

"What I don't understand is why he went to so much effort, the enterprise of constructing this and everything, just to hide a couch and a TV" commented Ulrich.

"Perhaps this is where he came to watch sports events when his wife was hampering him?"



No-one responded to Odd's quip. And then he suddenly remembered Aelita's great solitude.

They quickly arranged themselves on the couch, Ulrich and Odd sitting on the arms because there was not enough space on the actual cushions. Jeremy began to fuss over the video player.

"There's a tape already inside" he said. "Give me a moment."

The TV came to life, showing the classic grey background that indicated there was no signal. Then the recorder clicked, and the image on the screen switched to black.

Jeremy turned up the volume and joined the others on the couch. "Whatever this thing is, it's starting."

Sweet music began to play from the old television's loud-speakers. Piano music. Images, old photos yellowed with age, began to slowly montage in time to the music. Aelita, only two or three years old and scampering through the garden of a mountainside chalet, a simple wooden tricycle standing to one side in the grass. Aelita again, at the same age and in the arms of an incredibly beautiful woman, with clear blue eyes and familiar reddish hair that grew freely over her shoulders, the two of them wearing matching short dresses patterned with flowers.

"Mummy" she whispered, her voice strangled with emotion, while the sequence of images continued to play.

Her mother again, this time wearing an elegant evening dress and high heels; around her neck were a string of pearls that sparkled perfectly against her clear complexion. Hopper and her mother together, both wearing white laboratory coats. Professor Hopper was smiling widely, his round face half-hidden behind a thick, dark beard.

And then, without warning, Hopper's voice resounded through the speaker apparatus, superimposed over the music while new photos played on the screen: Aelita on the piano, Aelita playing with her favourite doll, Hopper smiling from behind a barbecue.

"My dear little Aelita. It's my hope that you are here to see this video. I've taken some care in hiding it, knowing that your passion for chemistry and the blank notebook would lead you here. I hope that I know you well enough to have not made a mistake."

The montage of piano music and photos stopped and in their place the professor himself appeared, sitting on the same sofa on which the group were now themselves squatting. He was dressed in a chessboard-patterned shirt and sitting with his back straight and his hands laced together over his stomach.

Behind the dense lenses of his glasses, his eyelids were swollen with tiredness.

"Nevertheless, if you are watching this film, then it means things have not gone well for me. I swore that if I returned to the Hermitage at the end of this great adventure, that I would



come directly into this room and set fire to this video cassette. If that is not the case, then I'm possibly not around anymore. This breaks my heart. I may not be there for you my dear. The photos from the beginning of this video are the only gift I can offer to help you not feel alone."

Jeremy turned towards Aelita: the girl's eyes were fixed on the screen as if hypnotised.

"Meanwhile, I feel I owe you some explanations. When you were born, I was still living under my real name: not Franz Hopper, but Waldo Schaeffer. At the time, your mother Anthea and I were working in Switzerland on a top secret project named 'Carthage'. But late in the project, we realised that our work was to be used not to benefit humanity, but to dominate it, and so we made the decision to escape. But we were unsuccessful. Your mother was kidnapped and taken away from us. I don't know where she is being held captive, but I am certain that she is still alive. I can only hope that she is alright. You cannot imagine how long I have searched for her. I did all that was in my power to find her again, but I also had to think of protecting you.

I hid in this city and began teaching at Kadic Academy, under the assumed name of Franz Hopper. While here I also created Lyoko, using the same programs that your mother and I developed together under Project Carthage. It was my intention that Lyoko would protect us from the malign intentions of Carthage. But nevertheless, in the course of time, they tracked me here as well. And now that they have arrived

I must make fresh preparations to escape again. But they've attempted to capture you, and injured you in the process. And injured you severely, a bullet to the head. You were in danger of dying."

Aelita brought a shaking hand to her head and, probing between the hairs, she felt a thick scar.

"I alone had the means to cure you. And, if you are listening to me now, you already know what I mean. When I complete recording this message onto the video cassette, I will take you with me and lead you to Lyoko. To keep you safe. To heal you. But I am very afraid Aelita. X.A.N.A..."

The rest of the sentence dissolved in interference, and the image on the screen flickered for an instant.

"...but if you're listening to me know then things clearly did not go according to plan. And so you must destroy the supercomputer and everything hidden beneath the old factory."

"And here's where we came in..." Odd murmured.

"You must destroy it in order that no-one else can find it and use it for themselves. But it's not the invention itself that is the problem. It is the men. These men are dangerous Aelita. These men are *evil*."

On the screen, Professor Hopper dried his eyes with a handkerchief. His voice was shaking with emotion and anger. Then he continued: "And now we come to the second thing I must ask of you: open the TV cabinet in this room. Inside you will find a wooden box. It contains a chain with a pendant. It

was a gift that your mother made for me, and I in turn gave an identical one to her. Please treasure it as if it is the most precious possession you have. And then Aelita, you must find your mother. I know that this is a difficult and dangerous task, my dear, but you're clever and brave, and there will certainly be someone there to help you, as there has been for me. So if you ever need help you can call on the aid of..."

Interference cut the word in two, and the video skipped ahead several seconds.

"...ern. If you ever have need, turn to them. And when you embrace your mother again, please give her a kiss for me."

The video jumped ahead again due to further interference, but this time nothing else played.

"Nothing's wrong with the cassette" Jeremy sighed in regret, having moved forward to check the player. "That's the end. There isn't any more."

In silence Aelita rose from her place, stepped up to Jeremy and gestured for him to move aside with a light touch of her fingers. Then she opened the dark door in the front of the cabinet. Just as her father had said in the video, on the inside was a wooden box, little bigger than the palm of one's hand. She opened it, and extracted the pendant from within.

It was affixed to a thin golden chain, a little larger than a coin, and shone so brightly that Aelita could see her reflection in it. Incised into the surface of the pendant were two letters, *W* and *A*. And beneath them was the image of a sailor's knot.

"Waldo and Anthea" she murmured, now remembering her father's true name.

"And a knot" said Jeremie.

"Yes. Together, forever."

19

EVA SKINNER

(CALIFORNIA, UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, JANUARY 1 OTH)

The first flight to France was due to take off at six in the morning and the loudspeakers were instructing its passengers to head towards the boarding gate.

Eva Skinner started off through the long corridors, dragging behind her a rigid trolley that she was using to carry her hand luggage. She had changed her clothes, and now was wearing a pair of smart jeans and a colour-stained T-shirt.

She was smiling.

To her mind humans were very complicated creatures. To travel from America to France required her to purchase a ticket and they needed visas and special permits because she was a 'minor' and 'unaccompanied'. There was the necessity of luggage. And clothing. And once she arrived in

France she would still have to travel to the city where the school was located.

But things were not too bad: she had taken advantage of the free time in the airport to connect to the Internet and make the necessary preparations for her arrival: the headmaster would be ready to receive her tomorrow with open arms. A foreign-exchange student, a girl from the United States.

Eva passed the retail outlets and the duty-free stores that were one by one opening for business in the huge terminal building. She studied the monitors in search of her gate. Number 27. She had to follow the signs and get a move on, the flight was already boarding.

The hostess smiled. She was a nice girl, wearing a comical little hat that was matched with a chaste tailored uniform bearing the name of the airline.

"Your name please?"

"Eva. Eva Skinner."

"One moment please."

She keyed something into her computer and then smiled again.

"One seat booked in first class. Travelling unaccompanied. Fine. Young lady, could you please show me your boarding pass and the authorisation of your parents?"

"Of course."



♦ EVA SKINNER ♦

Eva handed the woman a brochure for a chain of fast-food restaurants that she had found on the floor shortly beforehand: *Cheeseburger deal, only \$1.25. Children eat free.*

In handing it to the hostess, she painstakingly ensured that her long fingers brushed against hers.

The woman opened her brochure, which contained a big colour photograph of a cheeseburger, and nodded with a blank expression. "That's fine young lady, you can pass. My colleague on board will direct you to your seat.

Eva nodded and moved onwards. Then she slipped with the other passengers into the long metal tube that led into the aircraft.

First class was almost empty.

Next to Eva, but separated from her by a little aisle, a woman in a dark suit was concentrating as she worked on her laptop computer, and on her other side, was a rather elderly gentleman. He had been dozy even before they took off and was now dribbling on a five hundred dollar tie.

"Miss Skinner, is everything alright?" another hostess enquired, wearing the same smile and the same uniform as the one from the boarding gate. "You can unfasten your seatbelt now that we have departed. Would you like anything to drink?"

"I'll have the same as that gentleman" Eva answered, indicating the sleepy man.

"A cognac? Ha ha, I don't think that would be suitable miss. Maybe you'd prefer a glass of fruit juice?"

"Yes. That."

The hostess hurried back up the aircraft's long aisle, her hips wiggling. She seemed happy to be making herself useful. Perhaps that was how she was paid: in making her feel useful.

The armchairs here in first class were so big and soft, comfortable. Perhaps she should sleep: without having to worry about what happened to the body of Eva Skinner, X.A.N.A. could calmly reflect and plan ahead.

There were so many things that it had to consider: for example, how to be riend those children and earn their trust.

And above all else, how to kill them.



20

THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL

(CITY OF THE IRON TOWER, FRANCE, JANUARY 1 OTH)

Yumi, Jeremy, Odd, Aelita and Ulrich arrived at Kadic's main gate about ten minutes late.

Eventually they had fallen asleep. But hardly an hour had passed before their alarm clock began to ring. And so there they were, breathing heavily and their eyes burning after a sleepless night.

"And so it begins, again" commented Odd.

"We have two hours of chemistry first" said Jeremy, checking his schedule.

"I've got history" added Yumi. "And I better get moving, Professor Fumet is usually already in the classroom by now."

"Wait a second!" replied Odd, annoyed. "Are we going to...start all over again, with the Hermitage and Lyoko?"

"Well it seems clear to me" Jeremy nodded. "We'll search for Aelita's mother. But we'll leave the supercomputer deactivated."

Aelita was wearing her father's pendant around her neck.

Ulrich smiled. "Guys, we're better off discussing this another time, alright?"

Yumi transferred her rucksack of books from one shoulder to another.

"Well the Prof waits for no man. I've really got to head off guys."

"We'll see each other at dinner then, in the cafeteria."

"Awesome. Well, have a good first day everybody" she answered, quickly setting off up the path beyond the gate, continuing ahead of the others.

It was January and finally it had stopped snowing.

Weak but bright sunlight sparkled on the freshly salted streets. The footprints of many little gym shoes were trampled into the path leading up to Kadic's entrance.

Five children who were almost dead on their feet started running up the frozen driveway. Happy to still be together, in spite of everything.

Before them rose the academy's palatial main building, solemn and majestic. But there was nothing threatening about it: the winter sun was shining on the closed windows and the great main door was wide open to receive them.

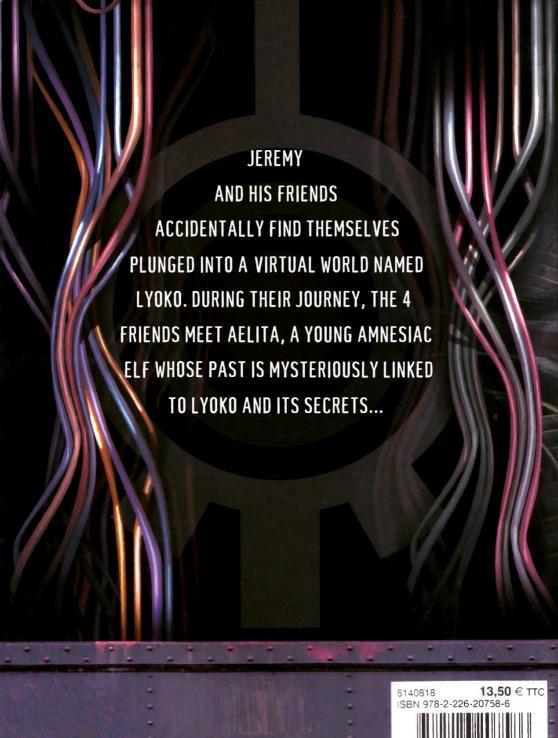
They entered with a jump.



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