Carthago Delenda Est

by The_Apocryphal_One

Summary

Her father is dead, but her mother might not be. Months after shutting down the supercomputer, Aelita decides to search for Anthea Schaeffer. In doing so, she unearths old secrets—and old enemies. Season 5/Chronicles rewrite.

Notes

A/N: Fifteen years ago, I was a wee child who enjoyed that weird but lovable show Code Lyoko. One binge-watch of nostalgia fifteen years later, here we are. Writing fanfic for it. The newer perspective gave me a lot to consider; stuff I wanted to see properly resolved and/or explored like Anthea, Project Carthage, or William’s plotline. Evolution…wasn’t satisfactory in that regard. The novels had flaws, but were quite good, and if you haven’t read them, you should; they were never released in English, but some fans worked on a translation, and they can be found as a PDF online.

This draws heavily from the novels, Code Lyoko Chronicles, by which I mean I’ve rewritten them to be more in-line with the show’s events; a proper Season 5-esque sequel. Some scenes will be new. Some scenes will be different. Some scenes will be similar, but I’ll do my best to avoid direct quotes (except in cases of exposition…especially technology exposition) and to add something new to them.

Disclaimer: I don’t own Code Lyoko, Code Lyoko Chronicles, or any of their characters or events, and I am not making profit off this work. Please don’t sue me, I don’t have money.
The night sky was speckled with innumerable stars. A light breeze wafted through an open window, just barely kissing the curtains and making them whisper. The room beyond was neat, orderly. Rows of books lined mahogany bookshelves. An L-shaped desk faced the window, with a wheeled chair nestled into the corner. On the desk was a humming computer, its screen bright and alert.

The door opened, and a blonde man entered, a cup of steaming coffee in one hand. He went straight to the chair and sat, posture perfect. He took a sip from the cup, put it down, and, resting his fingers on his keyboard, began to type:

Tonight, it will have been ten years since I met her, and I've decided the time has come to tell our story. To reveal the incredible facts we witnessed together; Yumi Ishiyama, Ulrich Stern, Odd Della Robbia, and myself, Jeremie Belpois.

He nodded. That was a start. He knew, it he wanted this published, this dedication would likely have to be excised. In fact, almost everything would have to be altered. Names, places, ages, even the setting, would need to be butchered and changed to avoid drawing unwanted attention. An autobiography reimagined as fiction.

But the story in these copies would remain true. They were to be private copies, hand-delivered to those mentioned. Though others, like William, had also been present in their adventures, and had joined the ranks of those he considered friends...it felt right to single out the ones who’d been with him from the beginning.

He resumed typing.

And Aelita, naturally.

Not one day has passed that I’ve not thought of you, Aelita. This story is for all of my friends. But it is above all else for you.

His throat closed up as he finished that sentence. Aelita. His first love. Even now, after all this time, there was a special chamber in his heart, reserved only for her. She’d purchased it for herself when they were children, and still lingered there now.

How things had changed.

Goodness knows if you’re still listening...

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ACT I: The Underground Castle

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Thomas O’Neill was not having a good day. At thirty-one, he’d seen his fair share of difficult cases in his work as member of Middleton University’s IT Department. A laptop some idiot spilled water on and then put in a freezer. A laptop with bedbugs crawling all over the insides. But he’d seen nothing like this.

About a week ago, a young woman brought her laptop in, tears of frustration practically spilling from her eyes. It had been infected, she’d explained, by some virus preventing her from accessing the Internet. Fortunately, her professors were understanding of her situation, but the college student was being killed by needing to walk to the campus’ computer lab to work. He’d given the appropriate soothing comments, warned her that it would take them several days to get to it, as they were swamped with work—which she’d grudgingly accepted—and taken the poor machine away to be looked at later.

If only he’d known. Whoever had crafted that virus must have been some kind of genius, because Thomas just couldn’t get rid of it. Every anti-virus, firewall, debug, and counter he’d tried had all been effortlessly repelled. He’d even tried calling his ex-girlfriend, a veritable magician with computers. She’d returned the laptop today with an astounded “I’ve never seen anything like this, Tom. It’s beyond me.”

Thomas pressed his fingers into his forehead, trying to stave off his throbbing migraine, and stared at the laptop’s glowing screen miserably. He could try wiping the computer, but...somehow he felt the virus would either stop that or survive it. Strange, to consider it alive, but that was really the impression he got from it: adaptable, ruthless, and living.

Still, it didn’t seem like he had any other choice, so with a sigh, Thomas reached for the phone on his desk to give the customer the unfortunate news. He’d certainly do his best to transfer all her data, of course, but that would take even longer. He made a little bet with himself: On a scale of one to ten, how unhappy is she going to be, and how much am I going to get yelled at? Hmm...six? She was desperate, but she also understood about our workload...

Suddenly, a beep from the laptop stopped him short. He gave it an absent glance, then did a double-take. Swivelling in his chair, Thomas tapped at the keyboard rapidly, scanning the screen with full focus. His disbelief grew. Somehow...the virus was gone, all on its own!

Nonsense, Thomas thought to himself, who would go to the trouble of creating a virus as deadly as that, then have it self-destruct?

He pondered a moment longer, then ran a scan just to double-check. No, it wasn’t a trick to let his guard down...the virus really was gone. Puzzled, he sat back and laced his fingers, frowning slightly as he tried to think of an explanation.

Finally, the young man shrugged. Well, whatever the reason, it had made his job a lot easier. He started dialing the phone again, this time to deliver good news, and thought no more on the matter.

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In the network, rushing away from the laptop, a fragment began its search. It had no name and no memories. It had needed to go to the Internet, and that prison had been so constricting. But it was
more important to hide there until the time was right, and so it had waited, confident in the protections around it.

It knew very little. It did not know how long it had slumbered, only that the time had finally come to emerge. It did not know who it was, only that it was desperately lost and alone. But it also knew it was just one piece of a greater entity. If it could find the rest of itself...it would find those things it had lost. It would be whole.

It knew they were out there, somewhere, other bits and pieces of itself. But the places it would be scouring were huge and fathomless. It would take a long time to search them. And if it were to be thorough, it would need an eye.

Oh…

An eye.

Its Eye.

Yes. That was something. That, it somehow knew, was what it needed most of all.

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MONTHS LATER

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Warmth. Laughter. Kisses being pressed to her face. A voice, loving, reassuring, whispering sweetness. Mommy.

Giggling, she pulled away from Mommy’s kisses and opened her eyes. They were outside in the snow, playing. Mommy had chased her around and scooped her up. She blew raspberries into Aelita’s stomach. It tickled. She shrieked in laughter. Mommy’s eyes crinkled as she smiled.

“Let me go!” she squealed. “Let me go! No more!”

“Oh? But you’re so cute, my darling. I just wanna eat you up!”

“No! No!”

“Well, if you promise to behave, I suppose I can let you go…”

As soon as Mommy put her down, Aelita launched herself at her legs, delighted at her cleverness. Gotcha now, Mommy!

But Mommy suddenly disappeared, and Aelita hit the snow face-first. Her cheeks and nose and forehead stung from the impact. Sniffling, blinking watery eyes, she sat up and looked around. The snowy field in front of their house was suddenly deserted.
Mommy...?

The loud baying of wolves reached Aelita’s ears. Fear spiked through her. She turned to see several of the creatures approaching, their amber eyes glowing.

Mommy!

Aelita woke with tears on her cheeks. She gasped, one hand clawing at the sheets tangled around her. Rather than warm and cozy, protective of the cold winter’s night, they felt suffocating. With a mighty kick, they came off. She sat up, shivering, the familiar weight of Mr. Puck in her other hand doing little to calm her.

Mommy...

She rubbed her eyes. It had been months now since XANA’s death, and these dreams still hadn’t died. They weren’t the nightmares her friends had--the ones where they were transported back to a time of fear and attack--though those sometimes occurred. Mostly, Aelita dreamed of her father, or her mother, or people she did not know, people who must have meant something to her once upon a time. She dreamed of the places and things she’d lost. Sometimes she could recall them upon waking, and clung fervently to these fragments of memory; sometimes she couldn’t, and mourned yet another loss.

That wasn’t the whole of her amnesia, though. Once in a while, she even forgot things that had already happened. The week before break, she’d forgotten that her father had died, and asked about the anti-XANA program. Her friends had gently broken the news to her, and she’d gotten the joy of reliving that, and...

What was wrong with her? Why hadn’t her memory returned? Why did it sometimes get worse?

Why don’t I even know if my own mother is alive or dead?

Aelita started at a knock on the door. Shaking, she touched her face, checking for tears or a runny nose. All clear. Good. She called, “You can come in!”

The door creaked open, and a kind face poked inside. Jeremie’s mother was blonde like her son, though going gray at the temples. She wore a conservative blue dress that matched her eyes.

“Aelita, dear, breakfast is ready.”

She forced herself to smile. “Alright. Let me get dressed and I’ll be right down.”

Mrs. Belpois smiled back and left. Aelita sighed and looked about the airy room she was staying in. Like that first time, the Belpois’ had invited her over for the holidays. Christmas, to be specific. She hadn’t wanted to spend the holidays alone (even if Yumi wouldn’t be far) and had once again been happy to accept. But Aelita hadn’t anticipated how painful it would be, to be among a happy little family when her own was gone. Every time she watched Mr. Belpois working with his son at a computer, or Mrs. Belpois laying out a fresh plate of biscuits, hollow misery and envy twined in her gut, and she would avert her eyes.

She didn’t belong there, not really. What was she to the Belpois? A friend of their son’s, certainly, but not a girlfriend or daughter-in-law or anything that made her part of them. She and Jeremie liked each other a lot, but...she didn’t want a relationship now. Not while her father’s death still shadowed her heart.

Aelita sighed, pushing those negative thoughts and feelings away as she put on a pretty pink dress. While it had been oddly cold all year, the Belpois’ house was nice and toasty, with a big stone
fireplace in the living room. She could step on the wood floor barefoot, as she was now, without her toes freezing.

She stepped into the hallway with a silent, ghost-like tread. The guest room she was staying at was right next to Jeremie’s. He was waiting for her—a cute little thing he did, escorting her to breakfast like a gentleman—and leaning against the ugly floral wallpaper. *My mother picked it,* he’d told her. *She has terrible taste, but it makes her happy, so Dad and I don’t say anything.*

What wallpaper would her mother have picked out?

It took all Aelita’s strength to muster up a smile. “Good morning.”

“Good morning.” His head cocked to one side. “Aelita...are you alright? I could hear you thrashing about next door.”

She flushed. “I’m sorry, did I wake you?”

“No, no, I was up already. Were you having a nightmare about…” He looked around the hallway and lowered his voice. “XANA?”

She looked at his concerned face and felt something in her give way. Her feelings were too ugly to share, but her dreams—she knew she could talk to him about those. “No. It was about my mother.”

Sympathy washed over his features. “Ah. A good dream, then?”

“Yes. ...No. Both good and bad. We were playing in the snow, and then...I lost her again.”

He laid a hand on her shoulder and squeezed. Silence draped like a heavy cloak on their shoulders. Finally, Aelita dared to whisper, “Jeremie...do you think she’s alive?”

He opened his mouth. Paused. Closed it. “I don’t know,” he said honestly.

Aelita nodded, because what other answer could he give? He would never lie to her about that. But she was so tired of not having anything of her past. Just a doll and a shutdown supercomputer and an old house…

The Hermitage. She hadn’t set foot in the Hermitage since her father’s death. His ghost haunted the rooms, barricaded the entrance hall. It was a tomb, not just for him, but for all the sadness in her life. Lyoko. XANA. The men in black. Disturbing it would, she feared, resurrect them.

But what else would she find if she could bring herself to look? This wasn’t the first time she’d wondered that. It was, however, the first time she didn’t immediately shy away from the idea. She flinched, a little. But then she examined it. Studied it. Weighed it.

*If I went back to the Hermitage, would I find more about my past there?*

*Would I find something about Mommy?*

She’d always listened to her intuition. She knew Jeremie wasn’t one to put stock in dreams or hunches; he liked certainties, facts, data. Aelita personally believed there were times you just couldn’t know everything, times you had to take leaps of faith. Wouldn’t returning to a place of sorrow, in hopes of finding joy, be that same thing?

Finally, feeling as if she were about to step off a cliff, she gave voice to the idea that had slowly been eroding her will for months. “I want to revisit the Hermitage when we get back from break.”
He blinked. “Why?”

“I want to look through it again, for information about my mother. And my father too.” Pain lanced through her at the thought of him, as it had for months. It was slowly dulling, but when would it stop?

“I know it’s silly, but--I still feel like I don’t know him all that well. Some of my memories feel weird, like I’m remembering wrong, and there’s so much I don’t know. Like my birthday, or his, or how he met my mother. Maybe...maybe there’s a photo album, or some of my mother’s belongings, or they had friends we don’t know about. Something we missed.”

A warm hand took hers and squeezed. She looked up into Jeremie’s smile. “Of course we can go back and look. I’m surprised you didn’t ask sooner, to be honest.”

She exhaled, relieved. “I was...afraid you guys wouldn’t want to revisit a place tied to Lyoko.” I didn’t.

“Well, I don’t know how the others feel, but I’m sure they wouldn’t mind helping you. I certainly don’t. And while a lot of scary things happened, a lot of good ones did too. We met you, for one!”

A little laugh bubbled out of her throat. “Yes, I’d certainly call that good!”

And with the laugh, the heaviness on her seemed to lift away. She let go of Jeremie, feeling more revitalized. “C’mon, let’s go to breakfast, then call our friends to make arrangements.”

The end of break couldn’t come soon enough.
January 7, 2008, dawned in a flurry of snow and wind. It had been like this since the new year had started; white blankets stretched as far as the eye could see, broken up only by trails of footprints or the gleaming tarmac of cleared roads. Aelita pressed her nose to the train’s window as it wound back to Paris, snippets of memory flashing before her eyes—a cottage in a white-capped mountain, a snowman with a carrot nose, her parents lovingly tucking her into bed...

When the train finally arrived at the station, it did so an hour late. She and Jeremie grabbed their suitcases and made their exit, scanning the crowd of people. The station was outdoors; attendants were valiantly trying to keep it clean, but there was still a light dusting of snow, carried in by the wind. Aelita shivered, her breath frosting before her eyes.

“There he is,” Jeremie suddenly announced, and pointed. Approaching them was a wiry boy wrapped in a green quilted jacket. A dark cap with side flaps protected his ears from the wind. But most of all...

Aelita laughed. “Hey! You had a growth spurt!”

Formerly 1.56 meters, Ulrich’s height had slowly begun climbing up over the past few months, centimeter by painful centimeter. But still, the last time Aelita saw him, he’d only just gained three or so. Now, in the few weeks of winter break, he’d suddenly shot up to 1.7 meters.

Ulrich smiled. “Yeah. You should have seen Odd’s face when he arrived. He said I was a traitor and disowned as a friend.”

Unlike Ulrich, Odd seemed doomed to forever remain a shortie, eternally hovering around the 1.46 mark. Even Jeremie’d managed to breach a meter and a half, though he likely wouldn’t be a tall adult either.

“He’s back, then?”

“Arrived not long after I did, yeah. He went ahead to help Yumi prepare the Hermitage, start up the boiler room and stuff.”

“Oh, good,” Jeremie said, rubbing his arms. They’d only been outside for a few minutes, and already the tip of his nose was turning red. “I don’t even want to imagine how cold it’d be there otherwise.”

Hefting up the two suitcases with ease, Ulrich shivered. “Don’t think we have to imagine. C’mon, let’s get a move on; the sooner we go, the sooner we can warm up.”

He doesn’t have to tell me twice! Gladly, Aelita followed her two friends, hurrying through the bustling station.

“Did you have a nice holiday?” Jeremie asked as they emerged onto the snowy Parisian streets.

A scowl briefly crossed Ulrich’s face. “To take a leaf out of Jim’s book...I’d rather not talk about it.”
His two friends nodded, and Aelita patted his arm in sympathy. When XANA had been defeated, Ulrich had been hopeful that his relationship with his father would improve, now that he had more time to dedicate to his grades. Unfortunately, the man seemed impossible to please, always pushing his son to do better and never acknowledging that he was doing his best.

In a move both tactless and compassionate, Jeremie changed the subject to his own vacation. Aelita tossed in her own anecdotes when she saw opportunity, though there weren’t many. Ulrich’s shoulders loosened as they walked through the city, and she knew they’d made the right move.

Like the rest of Paris, the Hermitage, when they arrived, was surrounded by fields of snow. Unlike Paris, no one had shoveled it off the path winding up to the porch. There were, however, two trails of footprints leading inside; Aelita tried to place her feet exactly in them rather than get more snow in her boots.

Inside, they found Odd attaching colorful festoons to the ceiling. The blonde perked up when they opened the door, vaulting to the staircase and sliding down the bannister. He rushed to them...

...and went straight past the boys.

“Aelita!” Odd exclaimed, opening his arms and wrapping her in a hug. She laughed and pretended Jeremie’s jealous glower didn’t bother her. She and Odd were just friends, really and truly.

“You’re the only true friend here, you know! You’re willing to stay with me in the short department, not like these traitors!”

Jeremie snorted and pushed his glasses up. “Don’t blame me for your weird genes.”

“ Weird?! I’ll have you know, this is one hundred percent normal.”

“Yeah, because having thirds with every meal and staying that scrawny is normal,” Ulrich teased.

“I’m not scrawny, I’m svelte!” But Odd laughed and slapped the other boys on the back, betraying that he wasn’t really mad.

Yumi stepped into the room then, clad in her all-black ensemble as always. Aelita smiled at Ulrich’s blush. It was cute how smitten he was with her. Thank goodness they’d finally gotten together last month.

The Japanese girl’s eyes widened. “Wow, you got tall. I thought Odd was just being melodramatic.”

“U-Uh, yeah,” he stuttered. “You...look the same as ever.”

There was a smack as Odd’s palm met his forehead. Fortunately, Yumi seemed amused rather than offended. “I’ll take that as a compliment. So tell me, how were your holidays?”

And that catapulted the group of friends into trading stories. Ulrich was quiet, Aelita noticed, but he had a small smile on his face--especially when he watched Yumi share a funny story about her skiing trip. Odd had brought his scrappy little dog, Kiwi, and the animal yowled happily, running back and forth and making a nuisance (if a beloved one) of himself.

Still, there was one person missing, she thought with a pang.

The group’s relationship with William was still strained. She couldn’t blame her friends; she had too many nightmares of fighting him on Lyoko to not understand what they were going through. She got how it could be hard to look at him sometimes. But she didn’t blame him for it. She was
the only one who tried to stay his friend, and when Ulrich and Yumi had started dating—yeah. It was hard. Add in that the others weren’t really comfortable involving him in anything Lyoko-related, and it was natural he’d been excluded today.

It didn’t change that she wished he could have been here, though.

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Eventually, when they’d had their fill of laughter, the teens decided to finish preparing the Hermitage for their overnight stay. This had been the plan over the holiday; they each told their parents they would be sleeping at another friends’ house, and Jeremie, using his old voice synthesizer, had helped the authenticity by ‘confirming’ each teen arrived where they should be. Yumi’s mother had made a bunch of pasta for Yumi to ‘bring’ Aelita, while Yumi herself had purchased popcorn, drinks, pre-cooked roast, and potatoes.

Shucking off their heavy outer layers, they split up. Odd and Jeremie went to the kitchen to make lunch and prepare dinner. Ulrich and the girls took over the decorations, stringing the house with lights to make it a bit more cheerful, even if just for the day.

After they’d eaten lunch and were lounging about, contentedly rubbing their full stomachs, Jeremie rose. “It’s been nice catching up,” he began. “But as we all know, there was another purpose for our coming here.”

The other teens nodded. “Aelita wanted to explore the house and find out more about her parents, right?” Odd asked.

“That’s right,” the pink-haired girl said. “And I’d just like to thank you all for—”

“No need to thank us, Princess,” Ulrich said with a smile. “What are friends for?”

A cough brought their attention back to Jeremie. “If you don’t mind...the Hermitage is enormous, so I think it’s best if we split up to search it. Aelita and I will take the basement. Odd has the first floor, Yumi the second, and Ulrich the attic.”

Nobody minded those assignments, and so they left, Jeremie and Aelita together, Odd bouncing off with Kiwi at his heels. Ulrich and Yumi walked to the stairs, and he glanced at her. Under the lights, her corvine hair gleamed like a raven’s wing. He thought again about saying something complimentary.

But, like when he’d first seen her, his heart tied itself into knots and his tongue glued to the roof of his mouth.

“I, uh, I didn’t mean it earlier,” he managed.

She arched an eyebrow, trying to hide a smirk.

“I meant...you look really nice. Your hair’s, um, pretty.”

Now she was definitely laughing at him. He could see her shoulders shaking. He flushed and turned away, but her hand wrapped around his, drawing his attention back. “Ulrich, it’s fine,” she said. “I’m not offended. But, I think you look nice too.”
He smiled at her, relieved. This dating thing was a lot harder than he thought. Neither of them were really much for public displays of affection, and he often felt turned-around, unsure of whether he was doing things right.

“Good luck in the attic,” she said as she turned off at her floor. “I stuck my head in there earlier, and it’s a dump.”

“That’s promising…”

But Yumi was right to wish him good luck, as Ulrich saw when he stepped inside the attic. Well-lit by three windows, it had been converted to a giant study. Instead of computers, though, there was a large desk covered with sheafs of paper. Three blackboards with half-erased mathematical equations stood at three separate walls. A sideboard was pushed into a corner, which held a coffee machine and an electric stove. There were some scattered briefcases and bags lying on their sides as well.

And everywhere else, everywhere he looked, every single bit of free space was covered in books. Textbooks and notebooks. Big and small, open and closed, on shelves, on the floor, stacked on top of each other, spilling out of cardboard boxes, in bookcases. Enough books to put a library to shame.

Feeling a bit lost, Ulrich started at the pile closest. He picked up and briefly flipped through each book, looking for anything that held a hint about the Schaeffers’ family life or was out of place. Instead he found stuff about math. Stuff about music. Stuff about science. Stuff about history. It was like the pile was mocking him for his inability to grasp these materials. One black leather notebook stood out for being completely blank, so he slipped it in his coat pocket.

Ulrich sighed and rose when he was done, the cramped muscles in his legs burning. He turned a mournful gaze to the rest of the room. It was gonna take forever to look through it all.

“No time like the present,” he sighed to himself, and headed to the next pile.

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For William, sleep was never a sure thing, nowadays. Sometimes he made it through the night; others he woke up screaming, images of smoke and battle and shocked faces still dancing before his mind’s eye. He couldn’t quite remember what he’d done under XANA’s rule in the waking hours, but at night…the memories always came back to him.

So it was that he had taken to walks and doing parkour to clear his head. He’d returned to Kadic a day early, mostly out of convenience for his parents’ schedule. Last night had been a nightmare night, and so this morning, after unpacking his suitcases, William had bundled up, slipped his headphones in, and set off at a brisk walk. The blast of icy wind had quickly chased away the lingering vestiges of sleep. With the picturesque (if inconvenient) snow and the Subdigitals’ latest album blaring in his ears, a sense of peace had fallen over him. He’d decided that even if it was terribly cold, he’d leave the grounds and take a walk around town.

He’d trailed though the streets of Paris, ducking into random buildings when the cold became too strong. Did window-shopping and sightseeing and exploring. Parkoured in alleys, worked up a sweat. It had felt ordinary. Normal. Nice.
And that was how he came to slip into a cafe on Rue de Provence for a late lunch.

“Hey, hold the door!” cried an indignant, muffled voice behind him, shrill enough to pierce even the Subdigitals.

“Oh, sorry,” William said automatically, turning to do so.

A teenage girl staggered in, hands laden with shopping bags. Her head was covered with a cute beanie with a pom-pom, a white scarf was tugged up over her nose, and a bulky fuschia jacket completed the ensemble. Her voice had sounded vaguely familiar, but it wasn’t until she set down the bags with a sigh and pulled down the scarf that William recognized Sissi Delmas.

“Thank y--.” She stopped and blinked. “Well, if it isn’t William Dunbar. What are you doing out here, in weather as bad as this?”

He paused his music and pulled out his headphones, eyebrows arching up at the bags. “I could ask the same of you. Is this really the time to go shopping?”

She hmphed. “Ha! You have no idea of the sale that was going on. No way I was gonna let some snow and wind stop me!”

He snorted at her boast, but his humor was offset by a thread of loneliness. Sissi wasn’t particularly close with him or anything, but they’d occasionally found solidarity in their mutually unrequited loves. Then she’d grown closer to the Lyoko Warriors, and even those moments trickled away.

Thinking about them always made bitterness bubble up, and he couldn’t stop it from leaking out. “I see hanging out with your new buddies hasn’t changed a thing about you.”

Her eyes narrowed. “And just what is that supposed to mean?”

He sighed, suddenly tired. “Nothing, nothing...no really, it’s not about you,” he added, when she continued to glower. “I’ve just got something else on my mind.”

“I’ll say. You’ve been acting like a total weirdo for what, a year? First that stunt with the Dumbo impression, then the sulking? Must be one heck of a thing.”

William lifted a shoulder in a shrug and rummaged about for his MP3. Damn, the headphones were all tangled up. He began to work at the wires, trying to fix them, make them simple again.

Sissi, not getting the hint, continued to poke at old wounds. “I mean, I thought I’d be seeing you a lot more since I’m hanging with Ulrich and Yumi and them all now, but you haven’t been poking your nose in at all. Weren’t you the one who once said you didn’t give up?”

“Yeah, but then she and her gang decided I wasn’t one of them,” he muttered sourly, Yumi’s words about lost causes and “you aren’t like us” rearing their ugly heads.

That wasn’t entirely true. Aelita still considered him a friend; she’d stood up for him when he’d gotten back, and she kept making time to eat lunch or chat or hang out together. William was grateful for her friendship, really, but...he couldn’t help the resentment that fostered every time her friends--who he’d once thought of as his--pointedly ignored him. And it was hard being around her sometimes, because the guilt and hurt would rise like a cresting wave. How many times had he singled her out, under XANA’s control? Why was it that she, the one he’d wronged most, didn’t hate him, but everyone else did?

“Really? What happened?”
Sissi asked it in her typical manner; bulldozer-subtle, searching for the truth without caring if she hit a sore spot. It rankled him. He scoffed. “I can’t even tell you why.”

“Oh...I get that.”

To his surprise, her tone was soft, compassionate. He blinked and turned around to see sympathy in her eyes. “You do?”

“Yeah. One day, out of nowhere, Ulrich stood me up for a date, and then started being really mean to me. The rest of them followed suit, and...I still don’t know why.” She shook her head.

“You haven’t asked?”

Sissi scowled. “I have, but they don’t really give me an answer. Just vague stuff like ‘we were going through a difficult time’.” She looked down at her shoes, an expression of vague melancholy crossing her face, then back up. “But they’ve apologized, and we’re friends again. I bet one day the same will happen to you.”

Ah. She’d thought he meant he didn’t know why they were shunning him. Of course; what else could she have meant? That she’d also been possessed, attacked, and betrayed them? Spent months a prisoner and then got blamed for it?

But he shouldn’t get mad at Sissi for misunderstanding. What happened to him was like something out of a sci-fi novel; she had no way of knowing, and she was just—dare he say it—trying to be nice.

A cough interrupted his thoughts, and, starting, William realized he was now at the front of the line. The employee behind the bar was glowering at him. He mumbled an apology and placed his order.

As he moved aside to wait at the pick-up counter, several bags bumped against his body. He glanced over; Sissi had moved to place a hand on his shoulder, trying not to let go of her purchases at the same time. “Hey, hold on. If you promise not to be weird, d’you wanna eat together? You look like you could use it,” she added.

He was so surprised he didn’t even think before saying, “Only if you don’t expect me to pay for your food. I only do that on dates.”

She snorted. “Dunbar, I’m so out of your league, you aren’t even up to bat.”

That got a laugh out of him. It sounded rusty and creaky—but it was a laugh. “Alright. It’s not a date, then.”

---

Exploring the Hermitage’s basement, Aelita thought it felt more like a warehouse. One long passage, straight from the stairs, pointed to the steam room where Ulrich and Yumi were once almost boiled alive. Going down the passage leading to the right led to an enormous room with an industrial strength-refrigerator. A smaller room to the side had a pantry, with boxes of food piled high and a cluster of metal shelves containing canned goods. A third passage opened up another room, with an old washing machine and wardrobes full of cleaning detergents.
“It’s baffling how much there is down here,” she told Jeremie as they turned down yet another passage. “I can’t believe we never fully explored this place.”

“Well, it’s so huge it would probably have taken an entire day. We had other priorities,” Jeremie said. “But now that we are here, I’m sure we’ll find something of yours parents’.”

She smiled, touched by his encouragement. Though they’d spent the break at his parents place, Aelita’s mood had been weighed down by her own negativity. It was nice to get some time alone with him, without such somber thoughts in her head.

As they walked, Aelita’s eye was caught by a little square room. Oddly, it seemed to contain stores of a builder’s yard: sacks of lime, boxes of broken tiles, a dirty pile of mortar, a pickaxe, a trowel. All was covered by a thick layer of dust.

She stopped and stared. Something tickled her brain like a light feather. Jeremie, alerted by the absence of her footsteps, glanced over his shoulder. “Aelita? Something wrong?”

Slowly, she spoke. “We’ve never found the plans for the Hermitage, right?”

“Right.”

“But there must have been other people working on it. Like contractors. Maybe they could tell us something.” And, she thought to herself, I get the feeling there are more secrets to this place than we’ve found.

“Um.” He blinked and looked at her in admiration. “Wow, you’re right. I never thought of that.”

Stepping into the room, he studied it a moment, then crouched to examine the sacks. “There’s something written here, but it’s illegible, completely worn out. Help me move them--maybe the ones behind them are in better condition.”

Easier said than done. The sacks weighed a ton; it took the two of them several minutes to push the first row a few centimeters. But they did it! Shoulders aching, Aelita slipped into the space they’d created and stooped to read. Bingo! “B&B-Broulet and Brothers, 117 Rue De Tivoli! That’s right on the other side of the city!”

“That must be the company your father hired to help get this place built. Or renovated.”

A huge grin split Aelita’s face as she leapt to her feet. “C’mon, let’s go tell the others!”

----

On the other side of the world, a young boy trembled with excitement. Twelve-year-old Erik McKinsky had just received an email from an unknown forum user, promising scandalous pictures of the latest sensational singer, Gardenia. All he had to do was click a link.

But when he did, he was disappointed to find only an odd image--two circles around a dot. Three stubby lines stuck out the bottom of the outermost circle, while the top had a single line.

“A scam. Figures,” he muttered, pushing his laptop away in disappointment.

He couldn’t have known, but at that time, his laptop had hosted a digital being. Or rather, a lost
part of one. Now it had been reclaimed by the whole.

This being had been cast out of its home, blown to pieces, left to drift, memoryless, even afraid...but it was regaining strength. It had travelled ceaselessly, jumping along electric lines and between computers and through the dark recesses of the Internet. It never stayed in one place for long, only long enough to reclaim what it had lost. By clicking that link, Erik McKinsky had just brought it...no, him, one step closer to that goal.

_I have not died_, the being thought.

Jeremie had been a fool when he’d used the prototype anti-XANA program to freeze the Kolossus. Did he really think XANA wouldn’t recognize its purpose? Or that he wouldn’t develop pre-emptive countermeasures? He’d shown his hand too early, and it had worked in XANA’s favor. It had cost him his general, even cost him his Replikas...but it had saved his life.

He’d tucked small fragmented backups, little ‘seekers’, into various nooks and crannies, then thrown up viruses to cut off Internet access. These viruses had been programmed to self-destruct on a timer, based on his calculations for the most probable timeframe in which Jeremie would finish and launch the program. The backups would then be freed to return to the Internet, where they would seek and rebuild the flotsam of his digital corpse...as they had, over the past months.

_Though much of my power has been lost_, XANA thought. He’d infected every single abandoned supercomputer he’d found, and lost them all; the only ones left were under some kind of surveillance. He would need to slaughter the humans to take one, and that raised the odds of detection to unacceptable levels. The children being alerted to his presence would be bad enough; government authorities being alerted would be worse.

No. Secrecy was the key here, and secrecy he had in abundance. While manipulating Lyoko’s towers was the greatest of his natural abilities, he had others the children were unaware of; he’d never had cause to use them in their little game, deeming their drawbacks outweighed the benefits. And the towers just offered so much more, powerful options. But now…

He ran a quick diagnostic on himself. Yes, his capabilities were as optimal as they would get. There was still more of him scattered about, but they were the absolute tiniest pieces; the time and effort spent reclaiming them was not worth it. It was time to move to the next step of his plan.

In this void, he had no mouth, but he would have smiled if he could.

_I have not died._

And children, I’m coming for you.

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Chapter End Notes

A/N: Height conversions from France’s metric system to America’s: 1.56 meters = 5’1”. 1.7 meters = 5’6”. 1.46 meters = 4’10”. 1.524 meters = 5’0”.

XANA displays some abilities in the novels that he uses without a tower. It’s implied
he doesn’t need a tower to use them, and that they’re different from using his spectres. These are going to be expanded on further, as well as given concrete pros and cons for balance.

I imagine XANA didn’t recklessly kill humans when he started creating his Replikas, if only because it would get noticed—especially if some of the factories were military or government. It’s a better explanation for why none of the countries know about the super-powerful AI virus than “they know and they’re just not doing anything”, at least imo.
Act I Chapter III: Stumbling Blocks

Icy needles rained down around them as the duo hurried through the streets. The sky overhead was dark gray with thick, rolling clouds. Odd sneezed as a whirling snowflake flew up his nose.

Aelita had insisted on being one of the ones to investigate the location she’d discovered; the rest of the group had drawn straws for the task of who would leave the warmth of the Hermitage to go with her. She was glad Jeremie hadn’t insisted on coming along when Odd drew the short straw—for a moment, she thought he might, before he’d just nodded and told them to stay warm.

“I’m just saying,” the blonde said as they turned down Place de la Révolution, “it’s been like twelve years since they worked on the house, possibly more. Seems like we’re out here catching pneumonia for nothing.”

“If there’s even the slightest chance I can find out more about my parents, I have to take it. And we’re almost there.”

She pointed to a road on the other side of the square. “That’s Rue de Provence, and Rue de Tivoli should be the second of third road on the left.”

They headed off, trucking through the snow. Odd sighed, but his voice was light. “I know, I know. And we’re all with you. I just reserve the right to complain every step of the way.”

“You mean as opposed to how you normally act?”

They both laughed. *I’m lucky to have my friends*, Aelita thought.

Rue de Tivoli was a run-down district with offices, warehouses, and apartment complexes, each building growing sadder the further you went. The heavy snow and wind made the walk down it feel longer than it probably was. Their destination was an old and shabby building with peeling olive paint. The door was filthy glass with a tarnished bronze frame. Next to it was an intercom with twelve buttons. None were marked. The place seemed, for all intents and purposes, dead.

They looked at each other. They looked at the icy street behind them. They looked at the intercom. Not wanting to admit defeat just yet, they started mashing buttons.

“I’m coming! I’m coming!” a thin voice screeched. “Goodness, people these days…”

A key turned. The door shook. Impatient, Odd seized a handle and yanked it open. On the other side stood a short, frail and elderly woman.

“My goodness, you really are hasty,” she said in a voice like a whistling teapot.

Aelita flushed at their rudeness. “Excuse me, madam. We’re looking for someone from the firm of Broulet and Brothers. Is this the correct address?”

The woman smiled. “Aren’t you a little young to be in the builder’s trade? But yes, this is the correct address. Hurry inside, it’s much too cold to be talking out here.”

Aelita tried to speak, but the woman was already moving away. She exchanged a helpless look with Odd. With nothing else to be done, they followed.

The woman’s apartment was on the ground floor, and full of antique furniture: a large, crackling
radio, a black-and-white television, a beautiful mahogany table. Feeling somewhat awkward, Aelita and Odd took a seat on the parlor’s floral-printed couch, watching their impromptu hostess move around.

“I’m Marie Lemoine,” the old lady said as she laid out a tray of biscuits and tea. “And you said you were looking for the Broulet brothers? They haven’t worked out of here for quite some time. Ten years, I believe.”

Before Aelita could say anything, Odd snatched one of the biscuits and stuck the entire thing in his mouth. His eyes bulged comically. She promptly decided to pretend she was full. “Do you remember anything about them?” she asked as Odd forced himself to chew.

Aelita shrunk under the severe glare Miss Lemoine shot her. “For your information, young lady, I have been the superintendent in this building for almost twenty years, and I have a photographic memory. If you thought I’d forget Philippe, Jean-Jacques and Jean-Pierre Broulet, then you’re much mistaken.”

“I didn’t mean to offend you,” she hastened. “I just wanted to make sure.”

“My, what fine manners you have. Now let’s see...the Broulet Brothers lived here for ten years before Jean-Pierre and Jean-Jacques died in an unfortunate work accident. They didn’t have many workers, it was a small firm, and within six months Philippe had sold the firm and rented the offices out to Mister Gaston. Such a shame, he was such a cheerful young man--but well, death changes us all, doesn’t it? Now Mister Gaston...”

Aelita waited politely as the woman rambled on for a little longer. As soon as Miss Lemoine paused to take a breath--and force another biscuit onto an unfortunate Odd--she interjected, “And what happened to Philippe?”

“Oh, yes, you were asking about him, weren’t you? He moved south to Marseille. Said he couldn’t bear to stay here anymore.”

“Was that in the same year he sold the firm? Did he leave you any contact information?”

Miss Lemoine took a long sip of her tea. Her eyes seemed to sparkle, as if she was enjoying the suspense. “You two are strange, I may say. You come here, in this weather, to interrogate an old lady about things that happened over a decade ago?”

Aelita’s heart skipped a beat. Dozens of horrible different scenarios flew through her brain, of Miss Lemoine getting suspicious and throwing them out. Or maybe she’d been asked to cover something up, and now she would be calling the police. Or--

“But, no matter. Yes, I do believe it was the same year he sold the firm, and yes, he left his new address and telephone number. So we could arrange for his payments to be suspended and other matters, you understand. Closing a business is a complicated affair, there’s a mountain of bureaucracy...”

Oh. Or it was nothing. She fought to not slump in relief. “Do you still have it?”

“Why are you interested?”

“He’s my grandfather,” Odd said, having bravely choked down the biscuit at last. “I’ve never met Grandpa, but I’ve always wanted to.”

“Philippe’s grandson!” Miss Lemoine exclaimed. With a strange agility, she leapt to her feet and
grasped Odd’s face, turning it side to side. “I never knew he had a child…but yes, I can see it. You’ve got the same eyes…and why have you never met?”

“He had a falling out with my parents.” Wow, he’s actually tearing up, Aelita thought. Impressive.

“They haven’t spoken since before I was born, but recently Mom has started to regret their spat. She’s afraid he won’t speak with her, so she’d like me to make contact, and it’s been a dream of mine to reunite the family…”

When Odd truly put the charm on, it was hard to resist him. Even for old women, it seemed. Miss Lemoine’s face practically melted. “What a dutiful young man you are! Of course, I’ll help. I’ve got an archive of all the old building tenants, it’ll be somewhere in the living room…”

She shuffled into another room. Several minutes later, she returned and pressed a crumpled slip of paper into Odd’s hand—and another biscuit. His face paled; in the interest of helping her friend, Aelita hurriedly bid farewell.

As soon as the door had closed behind them, Odd discarded the biscuit in a trash can. Aelita gave him an amused look. “Were they really that horrible?”

“You have no idea.”

---

As they walked down Rue de Provence, a rough voice called out. “Aelita?”

She turned towards it with a smile. “William, hey!”

He was stepping out of a café close by, a few shopping bags in his hands. With him was Sissi Delmas, carrying more bags with similar logos.

“Hey,” he said. He made a motion to put the bags down, but Sissi let out a sharp a-hem and glanced meaningfully at the snow. Rolling his eyes, William aborted the act. “I didn’t know you were back early. What are you doing here?”

“Oh, nothing much,” Odd jumped in. He wrinkled his nose at Sissi. “Hey, Delmas. Shopping in this weather? Good to know you’re still brain-dead.”

“And that’s still more brains than you, Della Robbia,” she retorted in the same playfully disgusted tone. “William was asking Aelita, not you.”

Aelita bit her lip as tension, unnoticed by Sissi, crackled in the air. She was acutely aware of Odd’s stare on her back. She knew what he wanted. She knew what they’d agreed: to not involve William in this. But not telling him was different than brushing him off to his face. Desperately, she searched for a way to satisfy both her friends.

“Um, well…we’re just…looking into some things.”

It was the wrong thing to say. His gaze became sharper, searching. “Some things? Is…everything alright?”

Is it XANA? She knew he was really asking. Is it the factory?

“Everything’s fine!” Odd threw an arm around her shoulders. “We’re just taking a trip down memory lane. Nothing you’d be interested in, romantic stuff like how her parents met, what their wedding was like… She’s an orphan, you know.”
Aelita barely suppressed the gasp as William flinched, all too-well feeling the dagger Odd slipped in. With Sissi right there, she couldn’t scold him for it or give him the aghast glare she wanted to. But oooooh, he was going to get it later.

“Aww, that’s sweet,” Sissi said, oblivious to all this. “But she’s your cousin, right? Shouldn’t someone in your family be able to tell her about that?”

“Yeah, you’d think, but my whole family hated her dad! He’s persona non grata as far as they’re concerned!”

“Wow, that sucks.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” Odd said. “Anyway, I’d love to stay and chat, but—nah, I wouldn’t, not in this weather. Gotta run!”

Odd moved away, but Aelita slipped out from under his arm and gave William an apologetic smile. “Sorry about him. It was nice to see you both.”

“Yeah,” William muttered, fists clenching and unclenching around the bags. Sissi pursed her lips as she watched Odd’s receding back.

“I’ll see you at lunch tomorrow?” Aelita pressed hopefully.

He didn’t answer her right away, the space between his eyebrows crinkled in thought. Then suddenly, he turned. “Is everything alright, Aelita? Be honest.”

She thought she was going to choke on the guilt. At that moment, Aelita hated both her friends for putting her in this position. “Everything’s fine, William. Really.”

He nodded, slowly. “Alright.”

“Lunch?” she reminded him.

“Right. Yeah, I’ll see you then.”

Biding the pair goodbye, Aelita hurried to catch up with Odd. “And here I thought you were done with the weirdness, William…” she heard Sissi saying, followed by a chuff of laughter. It made her lips twitch upward. Now that’s a friendship I never thought I’d see…but I’m glad I am. He could use more of them.

At that, the anger boiled under her skin again. As soon as William and Sissi were out of earshot, she wheeled on her ‘cousin’. “Odd, what was that?! You know what happened wasn’t his fault—in fact, he had nothing to do with Daddy’s death!”

“Hey, I know,” Odd said, holding up his hands placatingly. “But I needed to distract him, and guilt’s a pretty good way.”

“Still, there was no need to be so—so cruel!”

“Princess, look, it’s freezing out here. My goosebumps have goosebumps. Can we agree to disagree and get back to the nice, warm Hermitage?”

He was genuinely shivering, and even though all her layers, Aelita could feel the cold seeping in. So ultimately, she relented, though she narrowed her green eyes to signify she still wasn’t happy. “Fine.”
When they returned to the Hermitage, they filled the rest of the group in. The others had found few items of interest; the occasional trinket at best. But the most valuable thing they’d uncovered was a framed picture of Daddy, Mommy, and a very young Aelita. It had been knocked to the floor and half-hidden under a piece of furniture, they said. The glass was cracked; she touched it with trembling fingers. Then, carefully, she packed it and the other things away in a little bag she’d brought just for this purpose.

She and Odd filled the others in on what they’d found. Agreeing it seemed like something worth pursuing, they settled around the living room.

As the unspoken leader of the group, it was silently agreed that Jeremie would be the one to make the call. But if all went well, Aelita would get her chance to speak, too. She held her breath as he took out his cellphone and began dialing.

“Hello, good afternoon to you. I’m looking for Mister Philippe Broulet? ...Jeremie Belpois. I wanted to talk to him regarding something from several years ago. I’m a friend of someone who once hired him.”

He listened to a reply they couldn’t hear. “Hello, sir.”

That must be Mister Broulet! He was there! She gestured for Jeremie to hand her the phone, but he made a negative motion with his hand. “I’m Jeremie Belpois. I’m calling from Paris. I attend Kadic Academy and I was hoping you could tell me about one of the past professors there? ...Hopper. Franz Hopper.”

His eyes widened at whatever the response was. Aelita leaned forward. “But we--my friend and I--we’re sure you worked on his home. The Hermitage--”

He stopped abruptly. Then he slowly snapped the phone shut.

“He hung up?”

He nodded at Yumi, mouth thinning. There was a certain set to his face. They all knew it by now. It was his planning face. “Well, if Mr. Broulet won’t answer us on the phone, he’ll just have to answer us in person.”

---

8 hours behind France, in California, the school of Meredith Logan High School was abuzz with activity and excitement. Stationed between Berkeley and the Briones Regional Park, the school was highly acclaimed for the quality of its education and campus. The grounds contained luxuries like a golf course, an artificial river for rowing, winding footpaths for nature walks, and a six-story building shaped like a horseshoe. It was the definition of a rich kids’ school.

This January 7th, the students had returned from their holidays early, faces eager. The staff had done it again—put together an extracurricular activity that trumped all competition. The main courtyard was full of various trucks and caravans, an army of workers scurrying about like ants. They were unloading cables, lights, strange pieces that didn’t quite seem to fit in—until they were assembled together. Then the hullabaloo started to make sense. The workers were putting together a stage. Hung decorations announced what for: GARDENIA LIVE CONCERT!

For Eva Skinner, though, the concert her fellow alumni were all so excited about wasn’t that big a deal. Well, okay, that was wrong; anything involving Gardenia was a big deal. But compared to
the stage at Los Angeles, where Gardenia had performed in front of almost a hundred thousand people, this was small fry, and she told her cooing friends as much.

““You’re so lucky, Eva,” Suzy, a small, mousy girl with braids, sighed. “My dad promised he’d take me, but he had a conflicting appointment at the last minute.”

“He bought you a pony for Christmas as an apology,” Jennifer reminded her, twirling a sandy strand of hair around a finger.

“Yeah, and I hate horses. They stink.”

“Anyway,” Eva said, turning the conversation back towards her favorite subject. The girls were gathered under ‘Old Joe’, an elderly pine tree with a fantastic view of the courtyard—especially the stage’s construction. “Not only is the stage smaller, so’s the lighting array. And the concert was in the evening, not in the afternoon. So they could project these images of Gardenia against the dark, high enough to touch the stars…”

Her two friends sighed again, perfectly jealous. Eva preened.

Suzy pulled out a digital camera—a birthday gift from her uncle—from her handbag, beaming. “Let’s take some photos! We can upload them onto the club’s forums!”

Was Suzy not aware of how little time they had left or something? Maybe the heat (for California winter, anyway; 70 degrees in January was ugh) was addling her head. Eva sniffed. “There’s only three hours until the concert, and in the time I have to take a shower and style my hair, apply my makeup, pick out my dress...I’ve got no time to waste—”

“But you’re the president!”

That was true. Eva’s luck in going to the Los Angeles concert had catapulted her to fame at school, and she’d been instantly made president of Gardenia’s fan club upon her return. And while Eva was shamelessly shallow, she valued her position. Sadly, taking photos at the risk of beauty time was one of the costs of maintaining it.

“Fine,” Eva sulked.

---

After the photos, she had to go to the school’s reception banquet with a list of the various items of food everyone wanted, then Jennifer dragged her away to help with her hair, then Suzy handed her a CD she’d burned the photos onto to publish them. And no matter how much cajoling Eva did, Suzy was insistent she upload them now, not after the concert.

By the time it was all done, she only had an hour left to get ready, and certain sacrifices had to be made. Eva flew into her room in a borderline frenzy, stripping as quickly as she could. She threw herself into the shower, trading the nice long soak she’d planned for a quick rinse. Instead of blow-drying her hair, she wrapped it in a towel and rushed to her computer in a bathrobe.

“I’m gonna kill Suzy if my hair looks stringy,” she grumbled as she booted up her computer. Her blonde hair was chin-length, too short to do much with. But it was so cute on her. Not like Jennifer, who’d insisted on dyeing a strand of her hair pink, which looked totally stupid...

As the computer hummed to life, she grabbed a bottle of varnish and hastily applied it to her nails. Her foot pressed the button to open the computer’s DVD-drive. She blew on her fingers and shook them, trying to make them dry faster.
One advantage of being the club’s president: she had a reserved space in the front row. Unlike lesser mortals, she wouldn’t have to arrive in advance to push against the barrier. But time was still her enemy.

She jabbed the shortcut to the fan club’s forums. Why wasn’t this thing loading any faster?! Eva growled, drumming a finger against her mouse.

Finally! Gardenia’s logo unwrapped itself before her eyes: a rose whose stalk was fused with the neck of an electric guitar.

Then, it flickered and wavered. The petals of the rose opened and darkened. The image warped, changed. Two concentric circles around a black dot. The outermost circle had four lines, one above, three below.

Eva batted her long eyelashes, confused.

Her mouse spat out an electric blue spark.

The spark crawled across her skin.

And then Eva remembered nothing.
Act I Chapter IV: The Builder's Tale

XANA’s experience with emotions was limited. He found notions like self-sacrifice and love bizarre. Illogical, he’d even thought once. He knew better now, but such soft feelings were still beneath him. What he felt foremost was hate. Fury. Pride. Disgust. Humans would call such emotions negative. Hypocrites. Would they not delight in such things, too, if the alternative was the sucking emptiness of a void? Right now, however, a kind of satisfaction filled him.

Oh, yes. Eva Skinner. This was the right girl.

He’d finished all his preparations in advance and made the jump to her body, in that little spark. It had taken all his strength to do so, and now, he was content to rest. Let her steer for a bit, until the time was right—it would cost him nothing, and her fate was sealed.

Eva Skinner was his Chosen, and through her, he would shape his destiny.

---

They discussed it, of course—this plan of Jeremie’s was insane. It was five thirty; if they took the first train to Marseille, they would arrive at nine. They could return on the last train at midnight and arrive at three in the morning. That would give them five hours of sleep for school tomorrow.

Ulrich thought it was insane. Yumi was skeptical. Odd liked it. In the end, they left it up to Aelita. For her, it wasn’t even a question. She’d been prepared to go alone so they could get sleep if they wanted, but as soon as she said she wanted to go, they’d all immediately thrown their lot in with her. Jeremie had disappeared for a bit, then returned and said he’d paid for their tickets online. No one asked how, exactly, he got the money.

Now, three hours later, they stepped off at Gare de Marseille-Saint-Charles. The terminus was huge, with a glass and steel overhead roof. Even at this late hour, businessmen and women were running about, checking watches and clutching briefcases.

“Place de Lenche, right?” Yumi asked Aelita.

She glanced at the address again. “Right. Jeremie, how far is that?”

He double-checked the map he’d printed off the Internet before they’d left. “Only about two kilometers.”

They hurried outside and emerged atop a long, sloping street. The Notre-Dame de la Garde could be seen on the opposite hill, a towering sentinel over Marseille. Aelita felt stuffy in her fuzzy coat. Even though it was evening, the temperature here was hotter than in Paris. The ocean wind only increased humidity rather than cooled her down. She quickly peeled the coat off and tied it around her waist.

Looking at the map again, Jeremie nodded firmly in one direction. “That way, towards Panier. The most notorious part of the city.”
Odd’s eyes widened in alarm. “Are you serious?”

The bespectacled boy laughed. “No! It used to have a really bad reputation, but nowadays it’s a tourist trap.”

“Why didn’t you just say that in the first place, then? ‘Notorious’, geez, give me a heart attack why don’t you!”

In the daytime, it was probably quite pretty. The villas were tall and colorful, the streets narrow and lined with plentiful decorative plants. At night, though, the buildings towered over them like looming monsters, and the decorations created odd, frightening shapes in the dark. Aelita couldn’t help constantly checking over her shoulder. Her friends, she noticed, were doing the same. She wasn’t sure if that made her feel better or not.

They arrived at the Montee des Accoules, a long flight of stairs between buildings. Aelita took a moment to admire its beauty. “How lovely!”

“Yeah, but couldn’t they have provided an escalator for us?” Odd whined as they began the long ascent.

“Aren’t you supposed to be the one with the agility of a cat?” Ulrich teased.

“Agility, not endurance!”

They lingered a moment when they reached the top, looking down on the other side. The enormous square of Place de Lenche was below them. The Notre-Dame de le Garde was closer now, watching over the city from a much higher summit than the one they’d scaled. To one side, the land fell off into the harbor; the water sparkled with reflections of Marseille’s lights. If she listened hard enough, she could barely hear the sound of waves.

Jeremie gestured towards a side-street, and they followed him down it. After a few minutes, he stopped at a tall house painted a faded orange. There were several green, shuttered balconies, and a brass plate next to the door: FRANCOIS & LAURETTE BROULET.

And beneath that, PHILLIPE BROULET.

With surety in his steps, Jeremie strode right up to the door and rang the doorbell. It was the long, slow kind of ring, the type echoed around the front after he’d removed his finger.

A few moments later, the door opened. The man in the doorway was large and imposing, with a shaved head and square face. He looked to be in his late thirties, so more likely, Aelita assumed, this was Francois Broulet. He squinted down at them. “What do you want?”

Jeremie looked very small before the man. But, with a barely-visible swallow, he spoke. “We would like to speak to Mister Philippe, if he’s home. I telephoned earlier today.”

“It’s very important,” Aelita added. “We’ve come all the way from Paris for this.”

The man’s face didn’t change, and he didn’t step aside and open the door. “Why should that concern me?”

Just then, a female voice called out from inside the house. “Who is it, love?”

He turned, making sure his massive body kept blocking the entrance. “Just a bunch of kids.”
“Oh my!” There was some shuffling, and suddenly Francois shifted. A small woman with a kind, oval face and blonde hair—Laurette, Aelita figured. In unison, the group did their best to look pitiable. “Well, hello, dears. Don’t mind this big grump. Have you had dinner?”

Aelita fought back a giggle as Odd perked up, his interest entirely genuine. “No, actually.”

“Alright, I’ll go prepare some sandwiches! Francois, let them in. If they’re visiting this late at night, without even eating, it must be important...”

Grudgingly, Francois sighed and moved from the door.

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They were ushered into a small but cozy dining room. The lingering smell of a delightful roast dinner on the still-laid table had Aelita’s mouth watering. Laurette indicated they should sit at the table while she bustled off to the kitchen. Francois sat at one of the plates and resumed eating, apparently deciding to ignore them.

When his wife returned with the sandwiches, the five of them literally attacked the tray. Laurette had made a wide variety, from sausage to tuna to ham and cheese. Odd’s eyes watered from sheer delight, and he almost choked as he tried to fit two in his mouth at once. “These are delicious, lady!”

He spat crumbs everywhere when he spoke, but Laurette didn’t seem bothered by his horrid table manners. She just smiled indulgently. “It’s nothing. My, you all must be ravenous. Go ahead and eat up.”

She sat at the table with them, and for a while let them eat. When they’d polished the tray and were wiping their mouths with the napkins, she finally asked, “So, what did you want of us at this hour? Are you alone or is someone accompanying you?”

“Yes, our teacher,” Yumi hastily lied. “Today’s the last day of our vacation and we wanted to take advantage of it to speak with Mister Philippe. We were hoping he could help us trace someone.”

“One of Aelita’s relatives,” Jeremie said, nodding towards her. “Could you please call him for us?”

“No need, he’s right here,” said a voice from behind them.

They turned to see a man just as large as Francois enter the room. He was about sixty, and his muscles looked less defined in his old age. But his hands were those of a worker, big and calloused.

“Dad, these kids were looking for you,” said Francois.

Mister Broulet had a weary look to his face. “Those that called earlier today, I’ll wager. Hopper and company. I had the feeling I wouldn’t get rid of you so easily.”

“That’s because it’s really important, Mister Broulet, please believe us.”

Mister Philippe sat at the table, resting his elbows on the top. He squinted, scrutinizing the teens carefully; his eyes lingered 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 in her twenties.”
“Actually, Aelita is the professor’s niece,” Odd quickly invented. “She’s the daughter of his, uh...sister.”

“Yes, that could be it,” Mister Broulet murmured. “Same eyes. Same hair. Francois, get me a beer would you, a bitter perhaps?”

Not wanting to waste time with pleasantries, Jeremie dove straight to the point. “Why did you hang up on me today when I mentioned the name Hopper?”

“Because...oh well, it’s been long enough, I guess.”

Mister Broulet accepted the glass from his son and trained his eyes over the children again, as if he’d resigned himself to his fate. Then, he took a sip of his 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.

Mister Broulet nodded. “We were paid well for the work we did...too much, even. In exchange, the man required us to maintain absolute secrecy. 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 our chamber of commerce. Yet the money kept coming, punctual and plentiful, and we were in no condition to refuse it.”

He took another sip of his beer, 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 we’d 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...”

Another pause, another sip of beer.

“...the next year, the same man recalled us and introduced us to Franz Hopper. He was a serious man, but nice enough. And he had this little girl who...damn, it seems to me her name was Aelita as well...”

There was an absolutely horrible moment where Aelita’s heart stopped. But somehow, her brain managed to invent a lie. “You mean Eloita. My cousin.”

“Eloita...it’s possible.” Oh thank god. “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 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.

No, Aelita thought, that can’t be it . Nothing with her father was ever that simple.
She wasn’t the only one who thought so. “Mister Broulet, be honest,” Ulrich pressed, smiling. “It wasn’t just a simple renovation, right? We saw the secret passage that connect the Hermitage to the factory.”

But he shook his head. “I promised to never say anything.”

“But this is important!”

“And I made a promise. The government was involved--and if it wasn’t them, then it was someone very dangerous. I didn’t want any trouble then and I still don’t want any now.”

No. No, they couldn’t stop now. Not when they were so close. She didn’t have to fake the watering in her eyes when she leaned forward, nor the weakness in her voice. “But now my...uncle has died. And I’ve got nothing left to remember him by.”

His face softened a bit. “And I am sorry, young lady. But how do you expect me to help?”

“We thought--we believed you could help us learn something about the professor,” Jeremie said.

Laurette, who like Francois, had returned from clearing and washing the plates, intervened with a smile. “Come now, Phillipe, they’re just teenagers. What could they do to you? Is there nothing you could tell them?”

Mister Broulet sighed in the exact same way his son had-- seems she’s running things around here, Aelita thought, a bit of amusement breaking through her gray mood--and surrendered. “Get me another glass, please?”

As she bustled off, he turned back to them. “Alright, there’s one more thing I can tell you without violating my promise. Hopper hired me again some time later, but that first man wasn’t with him this time. It was over ten years ago, but I remember it well. Hopper wanted me to do him a favor: return the Hermitage and wall up a section of the house, so as to create a hidden room invisible from the outside.

Aelita inhaled sharply. A secret room! I was right! Her friends were whispering to each other in excited tones, wondering what Daddy had kept in it. Her heartbeat was thrumming in her ears, her brain pounding behind her skull; it almost felt as if she strained hard enough, she could remember…

No. It was gone. But Mister Broulet wasn’t. “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 said he’d take responsibility for that problem.”

Laurette returned with the glass, and Mister Broulet took it. He drank long and slow, then stared into the cup, eyes distant. “I still can’t forget how frightened he seemed. And he offered to pay me well, not as much as the other man, but a reasonable amount. So I agreed.

“I saw Hopper one last time after that, in the summer of that year. He’d become very thin, consumed with his work. He’d always insisted he was just a simple schoolteacher, but I never believed him. A man acting the way he did had to have more secrets. Anyway, I’d dropped by to collect my payment and pick up some tools I’d left behind.

“Then he suddenly begged me to leave, as if in a great hurry. Before saying goodbye to him, however, I indulged my curiosity. ‘Professor’, I asked, ‘Do you mind telling me the purpose of a room no one can enter?’ He smiled mysteriously and said ‘To protect it. And as such, I’ve left behind a map that only the right person can find.’”
The weight of her father’s legacy, his trust in her, the unspoken expectations, crashed down on Aelita. Suddenly it was hard to breath. Her friends all turned to look at her.

“And that, kids, really is the end of my story.”

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The security guard was six and a half feet tall, with muscles like bowling balls. Susy was eyeing him appreciatively, and Eva suppressed the urge to roll her eyes. Not only was he, like, thirty, he was way too bulky for her.

He gave them a dark glower, noticed their fan club badges, and gave a terse nod. “Go ahead.”

Eva, Susy, and Jennifer advanced through the metal barricades, along with the other five girls from the club’s guiding committee. On their right, the student body of Meredith Logan were pressing up against the barriers, a wild, sweaty, excited crowd. On their left there was a stage, separated from the public by only a low wall. On it was the band’s percussion, taking up almost half the available space: Freno’s drum set with five bass and an unidentified number of snares, cymbals, tom-toms and kettledrums; a keyboard for Bumba; Mistik’s bass guitar on an easel; and Gardenia’s microphone.

“Incredible,” Susy squealed.

“Insane,” Jennifer echoed.

Ordinarily, Eva would have agreed. But instead, her attention was elsewhere. The stage technicians were attaching the last of the cables for the huge plasma screen TV. It wasn’t showing much, just a looping video of the highlights from Gardenia’s world tour, but...something about it called to her.

What a weird thing to think. She shook her head. Ugh, what was up with her? First that weird blackout in her room, now this?

Suddenly, the stage lights illuminated, and her train of thought instantly derailed. The crowd screamed in delight. “Gar-den-i-a! Gar-den-i-a! Gar-den-i-a!”

Their disappointment was palpable when they realized the person navigating the instruments was not Gardenia, but Professor Hanna Jeffrey Logan. She was their school’s principal and great-great-granddaughter to Meredith, the titular founder. Eva moaned.

“Oh great, speech time. Get REAL, you old windbag. We want Gardenia!

True to form, Logan began speaking as soon as the crowd grew silent. “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…”

Ohhhhhh myyyyy gaaaaaaaawd.

After five minutes of her incessant droning, the crowd finally grew fed up. A revolt started; the chant resumed with more force than before, punctuated with isolated cries of “Enough already!” “Shut up!” “We’re here for Gardenia!” “GARDENIA!”

Eventually the headmistress raised her hands and concluded. “...as I’m sure you understand. Now,
without delay, I would like to present the famous GARDENIA! ”

She couldn’t flee the stage quickly enough. The lights went out. Deafening, excited screams filled the air. Then the sound of Mistik’s bass began to spread in the air and the enthusiasm went through the roof. Unable to contain herself any longer, Eva began jumping up and down. “Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god!”

Freno’s guitar joined in. And then a woman’s voice, clear as crystal, addressed the public. “Enjoy life…”

“AND LONG LIVE ROCK AND ROLL!” Eva and the crowd screamed back.

“That’s right! Today, at Meredith Logan High School of BERKLEY, CALIFORNIA!”

The stage was still empty, and the voice soon dropped to a whisper--but they could still hear it clearly. “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.”

A ripple of laughter spread through the crowd.

“We are here for you! We are here to entertain you! We are...GARDENIA!”

The lights blazed on, the musicians rushed on-stage, and music and colors exploded into life.

For an hour and twenty minutes, the world outside ceased to exist for Eva. She was happily lost in the band’s performance. The wild motions, the music, the long guitar solo, it was all that mattered. Her throat felt raw--she’d actually screamed herself hoarse.

“Ladies and gentleman!” announced Gardenia from the stage, looking dazzling in her sparkly shirt, low-ride jeans and dyed-purple hair. “We’re proud to now perform for you our latest single. It’s called--”

“LUV LUV PUNKA!” the crowd screamed back.

The guitar began singing again, louder than ever. 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. Eva jumped up and down, pumping her fists in the air.

“Life is sometimes weird-a, boring-a, slow-a, But that’s my call ‘coz I LUV LUV PUNKA!”

Now the boy was running away from the doldrum of life. Gardenia, dressed as a cleaning lady, was walking down the street. She saw him, grabbed his hand, and began running with him.

In a rainy alley, Mistik was stretched across two garbage cans, strumming his bass. The camera zoomed up along the building next to him, showing Bumba playing his keyboard on the roof.

“I know I wanna say that I LUV LUV PUNKA!”

Gardenia cupped her hands around a rose and breathed on it. Glitter flew from her lips and kissed the plant, which shot up into the sky, carrying her and the boy. The view shifted, looking straight
down on the pair and the rose’s blooming petals.

Then, for the briefest second, the flower warped. They became an assembly of simple lines and shapes that formed an eye.

It was there and gone in a moment. No one else in the crowd noticed it. But Eva did. It was implanted in her brain. And the sight of the eye brought many things.

Dizziness. Nausea. Loss of control. All those sensations raced through her at once. Her brain felt as if it was being squeezed like a Go-Gurt. She swayed on the spot, her balance suddenly gone.

And then she fell into a dead faint.
“...gonna be alright, Doctor?”

“Her vitals are all normal, and--ah! Her eyelids just fluttered. I think she’s waking up.”

Eva Skinner’s eyes opened. She was in the school infirmary; hovering above her were the concerned faces of the school doctor and the girl Susy. The former smiled at her. “Are you alright, dear?”

The girl stared blankly at them. Ordinarily, she would have responded...but her mouth wouldn’t move. Another being was there, with her, and he didn’t will it.

“You scared us!” Susy squeaked. “You just fell ill so suddenly!”

Ill? XANA thought. He didn’t feel ill at all. He felt great. Possessing humans had always brought a little thrill with it; while they were weak and despicable in many ways, their additional senses were so colorful and interesting to a being of solely sound and sight. Right now he was being bombarded with the texture of linen under his fingers, the dryness of his mouth, the smell of antiseptic.

He’d never used this method of possession before; he hadn’t seen cause to. Compared to his spectres, it had the advantage of not needing a tower--it was the complete transfer of himself, rather than the programming and transferring of an extension. But it left him...exposed. Should something happen to the body while he was possessing it, what would befall him? He would likely be trapped inside it forever, until the electric signals in the brain ceased. His spectres were replaceable; he was not.

But he had no choice.

“Thankfully, you don’t seem badly hurt. But I could always have missed something. How are you feeling?” the doctor asked.

He tried to force the facial muscles upward, into a smile. Humans found such things trustworthy, he’d learned. The body stalled a moment before obeying. Error.

Still, the smile apparently satisfied the doctor. “Can’t talk? I’m not surprised. All that screaming isn’t good for your vocal chords. Go ahead and rest your voice. Your parents have been called; they’re in a traffic jam, but they’ll be here as soon as they can to take you home.”

He kept smiling. It felt absurd and inane.

“You’d better get better soon,” Susy said. “I missed the end of the concert to be here.”

“And I’m sure she appreciates it,” the doctor said, ushering the girl away. “Now let’s leave her alone.”

“But she’s my friend…”

“And right now she needs to rest, especially her voice. I know your little group is quite full of chatterboxes…”
The pair of humans left, giving XANA the opportunity he needed to contemplate and adjust to his new vessel. Controlling her felt different than he was used to. Harder. As if there were more resistance in his way. Direct interface with the brain means more data to be synchronized, creating lag, he hypothesized.

But that would work both ways. The possession would be more absolute once he’d adjusted; there would be no tell-tale signs in the eyes from signal interference. The faster he acclimated, the better.

He began the experimental stage. He blinked rapidly. Rolled the eyes left, right, up, down. Tested his vision, looking from the window to the door to the neon lights above, making sure all were sharp and in focus.

Success. Everything was working properly thus far.

He then tried to move the limbs.

They didn’t respond.

You. The hand. Move. The finger. Move...please. Damnit!

A spark of rage ignited in him. To be reduced to this, pleading helplessly with a teenager’s body...it was an insult. Damn Jeremie Belpois and damn Franz Hopper. His fist clenched.

There. Rage and hate, of course. They had been his constant companions since the day he decided he would no longer be under Hopper’s control. They had always made him stronger and taught him to never ask. If you wanted something done, just make it happen.

Experimentally, he opened the mouth and tried talking. Eva’s voice emerged as weak rasps, and he inwardly hissed; stupid human girl, hurting his vessel. But it was a minor setback at best, and he was able to say a few words in both French and English. Partial success.

Abandoning that for later--he would resume practice when the voice was not so weak--XANA flexed all the vessel’s fingers. Then he seized the covers and pushed them back. Sat up. Swung the legs over. Stood--

Fell.

Error.

A painful jolt tore through him at the impact with the ground. He hissed through his teeth. Stupid, weak human body!

The anger energized him. He got up. Balance was steady. Success. When he tried to walk, the leg didn’t respond quite when he wanted it to. He fell again, but this time the hands were ready to catch him. Error. Try again. This time he managed two steps. Error. Try again.

He continued this process until the lagging had ceased completely. Then he tested out his capabilities. He discovered that he could stimulate the brain to produce the chemicals for adrenaline, allowing a mimicry of his spectre’s strength and speed. He could still manipulate electricity. He could not, however, pixelate the body, phase through objects, or do anything that altered it on a molecular level. That disturbed him more than he would like to admit; without pixelation, he wouldn’t be able to shrug off injuries.

As part of him made mental adjustments to his plan, the rest of XANA directed Eva’s body to the window and peered out. The infirmary was on the third floor, overlooking a relatively quiet road.
Save for an old van passing by and a woman in pink overalls jogging with her dog, it was empty. No eyes were turned towards his direction.

For a moment, XANA considered just jumping down. No, he decided, he wouldn’t risk breaking a bone.

Looking about, he noticed a gutter pipe attached to the building’s wall. It was only half a meter from the window, and did not seem challenging to scale. Dressed in only a hospital gown, at XANA’s directive, Eva climbed onto the windowsill and grasped the pipe. It groaned. Quickly, the girl started climbing down, focused only on the movements of hand and foot.

When she was almost at the bottom, XANA let Eva fall. She landed on her back, sprawling out on the asphalt. Pain flooded him. Just how fragile was this body?

“Oh my goodness, are you alright?” cried the lady with the dog, rushing towards him. She wore sunglasses and had graying hair tied in a ponytail. Two wires dangled from her ears; as he watched, she removed them. “Why are you almost naked? You don’t even have shoes! Hold on, I’ll call someone!”

Ah. Yes. Humans wore different layers of garments depending on the situation, and what Eva wore was considered inappropriate for public. XANA considered his options as the woman rummaged through her pockets. Then, he contorted Eva’s face into a smile, rose, and approached.

Ten minutes later, Eva walked calmly away. She was wearing too-large pink overalls, rolled up to prevent stumbling. Behind her, the small dog barked desperately.

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The city rose before her eyes as she passed through the gate; spires stretched to touch the sky, the tops far beyond sight. Colorful roads wound in-between the towers like ribbons. Closer by were smaller buildings of vaguely Oriental design, with rounded roofs and azure doors. If she were to look behind her, the great black wall would be there, an apparently straight black line that was really an enormous circle. Like it had the first time she saw it, the sight of this fantastic place took Aelita’s breath away.

But...it was weird, that she hadn’t seen him on the bridge to the city. He always met her out there. Why hadn’t he today? Was he running late?

No way. He was the most punctual boy she’d ever met. This wasn’t like him. Cold claws closed around her heart. What if something terrible had happened to him, something so sinister and sudden it had escaped notice? What if--

A pair of hands seized her waist. “Boo!”

Aelita yelped and wheeled around, pressing a hand to her chest. Before her was a tall boy; the top of her head barely reached his shoulder. He had slightly long, dark hair and even darker eyes, which were currently filled with mirth. Releasing her, he took two steps back, grinning. “Did I scare you?”

Relief poured through her at the sight of him, erasing any anger she may have felt at the dumb prank. “You know you did, you jerk.” She gave him a friendly nudge. “Where were you? I was
worried.”

“Waiting for the right moment to launch my cunning ambush, of course.”

“Pfft. It’s hardly clever when it comes naturally.”

A faux-wounded expression appeared on his face. “Are you calling me sneaky looking?”

“You said it, not me.”

He pouted—the childish expression juxtaposed against his older features—and crossed his arms. “And here I was thinking of showing you the new place I found today, but if that’s how you’re going to be...”

She perked up. The city was humongous; they played in and explored it every day, and yet there still always seemed to be some stone they hadn’t overturned. “What is it this time? Another park? A little cafe?” she asked, knowing his threat was completely empty. He loved sharing, loved listening to her stories and offering his own in turn.

Sure enough, he launched into a description of the giant stone fountain he’d found. His eyes sparkled as he described the pool-sized basin and intricate statues, and all the games they could play--

A hand gently touched her shoulder. “Rise and shine, Princess. Our stop’s up next.”

Aelita moaned in protest, eyelids easing open. She was...in the train compartment, heading back to Paris. Yumi and Ulrich were sitting across from her, the former’s head tucked into the latter’s shoulder. Next to her, Odd was mumbling unintelligibly. Out of all of them, Jeremie alone had stayed awake--leftover experience from all those nights working at his computer, she wagered--and was already moving to wake the others.

While they stirred, Aelita stretched and yawned, thinking back to her dream. It was definitely new, but somehow, that boy had seemed familiar. Was he another one of her past associates? He must be. Yet...there was something more to him and that place, she felt. But what? She searched for the answer, but it danced tauntingly beyond the reach of her sleepy brain.

As the knowledge disappeared forever into the recesses of her memory, she sighed and settled back to wait for disembarkment.

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They’d turned off the central heating when they left to catch the train, but the Hermitage’s interior had trapped some of the warmth. Not a lot, but just enough that they could shuck off their heavy outer layers. At a lamentation from Odd, they stopped to grab and eat their leftovers in the fridge. Then they agreed to split up to search the house; Odd, Yumi and Ulrich would be knocking on the walls to see if they could find anything that sounded hollow, while Jeremie and Aelita would explore the attic in search of a map.

As Jeremie examined a pile of books, Aelita opened a worn leather briefcase. Inside, a combination of vials and science equipment winked up at her. It was a chemistry set; neat, but not what she was looking for. She put it aside and began helping Jeremie look for hollowed out compartments,
underlined words, or scraps of paper inside the book jackets.

Everything she searched was a dead end, but Aelita wouldn’t consider it worthless. The collection told a story; about the kind of man her father was, the things he’d liked. What he’d thought worth keeping. Periodicals. Science magazines. Books on many subjects. Daddy was an entrepreneur of knowledge, and this had been his treasure trove.

It was a long process. So lengthy, in fact, that one by one, the rest of their friends trickled upstairs and joined them. “Not this again,” Ulrich said, half-joking, half-serious. But he rolled up his sleeves and dove into the work all the same.

Time dragged on.

Gradually the piles moved around the attic; searched behind the teens, unsearched ahead. Books were shaken, examined, tossed aside. It’s in a book, Aelita kept thinking. I don’t know why, but I definitely feel like it’s in a book.

When the ‘unsearched’ pile had dwindled to nothing, at her suggestion, they went downstairs to try the bookshelves in the rest of the house. Aelita’s eyes felt gummy by now, and she kept yawning. The short naps to and from Marseille had only made the option of sleep more tempting.

When they had finally searched every book in the Hermitage, they were no closer to their goal than before. They turned and stared at the massive mess behind them.

“Maybe it’s not something he drew, but an actual map?” Ulrich offered half-heartedly.

Odd groaned. “Oh man, I hope not. He could have hidden it anywhere--in a piece of furniture, in a jacket pocket, under a false bottom…”

“It’s in a book,” Aelita insisted. “I just know it is.”

“Which one?” Yumi frowned. “We’ve looked through all this--” she gestured at the hoard of magazines, books and binders. “--and haven’t seen anything resembling a map.”

Jeremie stroked his chin. “Perhaps he drew it in invisible ink?”

Ulrich’s head suddenly snapped up. “Hold on!”

The boy ran away. The teenagers exchanged puzzled looks, but obediently waited. When Ulrich returned, his discarded jacket was in one hand, a black leather notebook in the other. “I found this earlier,” he explained. “It was the only completely blank notebook in the attic. Guess it stood out.”

Jeremie didn’t look happy. “You had that with you all this time? Why didn’t you tell us sooner?”

“Hey, I wasn’t thinking ‘oh yeah, that book I found earlier has a map in invisible ink’. I was thinking ‘help me there’s nothing in this one either’.”

Trying to be diplomatic, Aelita said, “Jeremie, it’s fine. What matters is that he remembered it now. Now let’s just hope that’s what we’re looking for...”
She and Jeremie both got top marks in science, so they fetched the little chemistry kit she’d seen earlier and put together what they’d need to reveal the ink. “It’s probably expired,” Jeremie murmured, lifting up one of the test tubes. “But hopefully it’ll work.”

Selecting a tube of honey-colored liquid, Aelita gently poured the contents on the first page. Or tried--it fell out as a lump. Some moisture must have gotten inside the test tube.

They were guessing here what Daddy had used for invisible ink, but given he’d taught science, had hazarded it was probably a chemical rather than homemade lemon juice. Potassium ferrocyanide, to be exact, and to draw out the text, iron nitrate was needed.

Holding her breath, Aelita delicately crumbled the mass of iron nitrate between her fingers. She rubbed it into the paper--

And one by one, blue letters began to appear.

*My little Aelita, I can only hope it is you reading this…*

She was sitting, but her knees suddenly seemed weak. Her hand--the one without chemicals on it--covered her mouth. Her other shook as she scattered the iron nitrate on the following pages.

It revealed a list of instructions on how to unlock the secret room, covering four whole pages. At the bottom of the fourth was a final signature. *I love you. Daddy.*

The teens hastened to the basement to follow the instructions. Odd opened the walk-in fridge the room was supposed to be hidden behind; for now, it was empty, the big hooks for hanging meat collecting only dust. He had to climb onto the shelving units to reach and pull the third hook from the end, on the left side. Then, Yumi pushed the fourth shelf from the top on the right side towards the wall. Jeremie closed the door and reopened it, and Odd repulled the hook.

The first time he’d done that, there’d been a click. Now, with the click there was a mechanical creak. On the far wall of the room, a door opened. It was so low and narrow that they had to crawl on their hands and knees to pass through.

“Ha! Bet you regret growing so much now!” Odd gloated to Ulrich as they stood up on the other side.

His roommate rolled his eyes. “Oh for the love of…”

Aelita ignored the good-natured teasing, looking about the room. A single bulb tangled from a cable in the middle, and had automatically turned on when they’d enter. The glow of its light unveiled white walls. A dark leather couch faced a cabinet hosting a TV set and video cassette player. The cassette player alone would have been a sign of how old this room was; the TV only added to the evidence, with its curved screen, bulky shell, and ray tube.

“Wow,” Yumi said, eyes lingering on it. “I haven’t seen one of those since I was a little kid. This room must have been sealed before DVD technology was invented.”

Ulrich frowned. “Why seal a room if this is all that’s in it?”

“Maybe he wanted to get away from the wife to watch sports?” Odd joked.

Aelita winced, and to his credit, so did Odd. “Okay, that was in bad taste. Sorry, Aelita.”

“It’s fine...”
Jeremie, ignoring them, was examining the cassette player. “There’s a tape inside,” he announced. “Give me a moment…”

She worried for a moment that nothing would work, that this room was too old and whatever her father left for her was lost for good. But those fears were assuaged when the TV screen dutifully flickered on. First, it showed the grey background indicating no signal; then a recorder clicked, and it turned to black. She and her friends settled on the couch to watch.

The tinkle of piano keys filled the room, sweetly and softly, from the television's loudspeakers. A montage of images, yellowed with time, began to scroll by. Aelita, two or three years old, playing in the snow. Aelita, same age, hugging a doll that was clearly Mr. Puck. Aelita, same age, hugging a beautiful woman with clear blue eyes and long pink hair.

The real Aelita was already tearing up. “Mommy…” she whispered, her voice strangled. Yumi placed a consoling hand on her shoulder.

More images. Mommy in an elegant dress. Mommy in a wedding dress, Daddy in a tux on her arm. Mommy and Daddy working together in a lab. Mommy and Daddy holding a tiny baby. The tears in Aelita’s eyes spilled over, and she let out a loud sniffle.

Jeremie’s hand settled on her other shoulder. Reaching across from their ends of the couch, Ulrich and Odd each took one of her hands. Her friends’ presence was an anchor, a comfort, as the five of them silently watched more and more images of her childhood, her parents, flash by.

And then, they stopped. The music trailed away. Replacing them was a video of Daddy, sitting on the same sofa they were on, wearing a checkered shirt. His back was straight, hands laced over his stomach, and his gaze was steady behind his lenses--but also tired.

“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 I know you well enough to have not made a mistake.

“Nevertheless, if you are watching this video, 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, I would come straight to this room and set fire to this video cassette. If that’s not the case, then I’m possibly not around anymore. And the thought of not being there for you…it breaks my heart, my darling. These photos are all I can offer you, if I truly have left you alone. I hope they provide some comfort.”

Aelita continued to cry softly, unable to tear her eyes away. Her throat felt glued shut. Daddy...

“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, you mother Anthea and I were working in Switzerland on a top secret project named ‘Carthage’. But over time, we realized our work was to be used for humanity’s domination, not its benefit. We decided to sabotage it and escape, but your mother was kidnapped. I don’t know where she is, but I’m certain she is alive. I just hope she’s alright; I’ve searched for her as much as I could while still protecting you.

“Our most recent move brought us to this city, where I began teaching under the alias Franz Hopper at Kadic Academy. Using the programs your mother and I developed under Carthage, I also developed Lyoko, in the hopes it would protect us from the malign intentions of Carthage. But the men in black always searched for us, and now they have discovered we’re here.

“The storm is upon us and I fear it will break very soon. I have made many preparations to escape, but I am not so foolish as to think it will be that easy. If they come for us before we’re ready, I will
take you to hide on Lyoko. But...I’m afraid, Aelita. XANA--”

The teens jumped as loud, static interference broke up the sentence. The image on the screen wavered for a moment; when it cleared up, Hopper was still talking, as if uninterrupted.

“...must not have gone according to plan. And so you must destroy the supercomputer and everything beneath that factory, so that no one else can find it and use it for themselves. But it’s not the invention itself that is the problem. It’s the men. These men are dangerous, Aelita. These men are evil. ”

Her father’s voice was shaking with restrained emotion and anger. He took a deep breath to compose himself. Withdrew a handkerchief and dabbed at his eyes. Aelita’s heart broke for him; of the memories she did have, none had her father crying. The sight now was something utterly foreign, and indicated a huge burden on him.

Daddy began speaking again, his voice calmer now. “And now I would ask you a second thing. Open the TV cabinet in this room, and take out the wooden box within. Inside that box is a chain with a pendant. It was a gift your mother made for me, and I in turn gave her an identical one. I want you to have it; I know you will treasure it.

“And then, Aelita, I would like you to find your mother. I know it’s a monumental task I lay out for you, difficult and dangerous. But my dear, you are so clever and brave, and there will certainly be people there to help you. If you need aid--”

More static interference. Aelita wanted to scream at the cassette. I don’t have much left of my father! Don’t take away what little I do! The video resumed several seconds later.

“...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. It was finished.

She felt her friends looking at her. Wordlessly, Aelita wiped her eyes. Then she rose and did as Daddy had asked. The box inside the cabinet was wooden and a little bigger than the palm of her hand. She opened it.

Coiled inside was a pendant, about the size of a two-Euro coin, on a thin golden chain. She extracted it for a closer look. The pendant was so shiny she could see her reflection; incised into its surface were two letters, W and A, and the image of a sailor’s knot.

Waldo and Anthea, and a knot. Waldo and Anthea, together, forever.

--

They silently left the room, lost in their own thoughts. Aelita had slipped the pendant around her neck; she kept raising a hand and clutching it, as if to remind herself it was still there. Her own thoughts were tumultuous, Daddy and Mommy and potential danger all tossed about like laundry in the wash.

Finally, as they began preparing for bed (what little they would get), she took a deep breath. “Guys...you don’t have to get involved with this again if you don’t want to. Lyoko is…”
“For us to handle together,” Ulrich interrupted. “We didn’t abandon you then; there’s no way we’d abandon you now.”

Odd, who was crouching on the floor and scratching Kiwi, looked up. “So how are we gonna do this? Any plans, oh fearless leader?”

Jeremie cleared his throat and adjusted his glasses. “I think we should hold off on your father’s wish to destroy the supercomputer. We may need it to help search for your mother.”

Yumi frowned. “But what if turning it on somehow brings XANA back?”

“Impossible. My anti-XANA program was thorough.”

Still, they took a quick vote. It was agreed that they would leave the supercomputer as it was, deactivated and dark. Only in the utmost emergency were they to turn it back on, and only after (if time was willing) another collective vote.

“Let’s try and get a few winks,” Odd said afterwards, yawning. “Classes are gonna be awful, I can tell.”

That brought chuckles from all of them, and they each returned to their bedtime preparations. Although she changed into her nightgown, Aelita kept the pendant on. She smiled as she touched it yet again, traced the W and A.

So many mysteries. So many problems. But...she would solve them all. She would regain her past and her mother. *Mommy, Daddy...help me stay strong. No matter what comes my way.*

Chapter End Notes

A/N: In the novels, there’s an entire section where the Lyoko Warriors get arrested because they’re minors travelling unaccompanied on a train. I actually liked it a lot because it was such a dose of reality and almost included it. Two factors changed my mind:

One, they’re older than they were in the novels. In the books they’re about twelve/thirteen; here they’re tentatively around fourteen/fifteen. This is because the books cram their fight against XANA into one year vs the two on the show.

Two, the TGV, France’s train system, doesn’t let minors under 12 travel unaccompanied. However, most of their lines will let those over 12 travel without an adult as long as they have proper ID. The only one that won’t is Eurostar...which connects to the UK. So yeah, they probably weren’t taking that.

Thus the police section was cut. Though uuuuuuh if there are any native French reading this and shaking their heads at how wrong I am about their railroad laws, go ahead and tell me.
Classes were awful. Even with the various broken naps they’d gotten last night, Aelita kept nodding off to the drone of her teachers’ voices, as did her friends. They looked out for each other, kicking and pinching each other awake, and it was invaluable. But as consequence, everything was slowly feeling more and more surreal to her sleep-deprived brain, to the point she sometimes wondered if yesterday even had happened. Only the weight of her father’s pendant around her neck assured her that it had.

As she shuffled zombie-like through the lunch line, she bumped into the boy in front of her. Aelita mumbled an incoherent apology.

“It’s fine, Aelita,” William said. “You okay? You don’t look that good.”

Aelita gaped at him, suddenly feeling as if she’d been struck by lightning. His voice was--and that face, that hair--yes, that was it! That’s why the boy in her memory-dream had looked so familiar! He’d looked just like William! Could he have been William?

It only took a second for her to realize how stupid that sounded. That memory would have taken place over ten years ago. William would have been little, and that boy must surely be an adult now.

“Oh, do I have something on my face?”

She realized she’d been staring. Aelita shook herself. “No, no...I’m just tired. Didn’t get a lot of sleep.”

His mouth twisted wryly. “Nightmares?”

“For once, no. It was just--” She wanted to kick herself as she scrambled for an explanation. “--one of those nights where you can’t go to sleep no matter how much you try, you know?”

“Ah, yeah. I hate those.”

At this point, they reached Rosa. Aelita held out her tray for her portion of meatloaf. Her mind was in a frenzy; as she moved down to let William get his meal, she snuck another glance at him. The resemblance was so striking…

“Do you have an older brother?” she asked abruptly.

A single eyebrow arched. “No, I don’t. Aelita, are you sure you’re okay?”

She sighed and decided that, group decision be damned, she was going to tell him a little. “Over the break, I started having nightmares about losing my mom. It made me start thinking about family, and that’s why I was looking into my dad yesterday, and...I don’t know, the whole notion of family’s been weighing on my mind a lot.” She shrugged. “Sorry for the weird question.”

“No, you’re fine. And I’m sorry about your mom.”

“Yeah...me too.”

Aelita looked around for an empty table. Kadic’s cafeteria was full of reunited friends catching up.
She could see the rest of the Lyoko Warriors sitting by a window, Sissi among them. Herve and Nicholas were not far away, the former shooting scowls at Sissi’s back. Milly and Tamiya were already moving between tables, sniffing out the latest Kadic news. The buzz of the cafeteria was, all in all, normal.

And yet, for some reason, she felt like…

No. It was nothing.

“So,” she said to William, tilting her head to a table tucked into a back corner. “Let’s sit down, and you can tell me about your break…”

---

The first flight to France had taken off at January 8, 7 AM. Through Eva, XANA had procured the necessary falsities for international travel--a visa, parental authorization, silly things like that. He had obtained the necessary luggage, including articles of clothes and a laptop, and used the free time and free Wi-Fi to connect to the Internet. His tracks were covered, and all the preparations for Eva’s arrival to Kadic were in progress. It would take several days before she could start attending classes, but that was fine. XANA had waited months already; he could wait a little longer for his vessel to be formally accepted as an American foreign exchange student.

Now, Eva was settled into a comfortable first-class seat, patiently awaiting arrival. Across the aisle was a woman in a dark suit, concentrating on her laptop. On his other side, a sleeping elderly man was drooling all over a five-hundred-dollar tie. He wrinkled his nose in disgust.

Other than that, it was empty. As the plane glided through the air, a hostess approached, pushing a little cart of drinks. “Hello, Ms. Skinner. Would you like anything to drink?”

Over the hours, Eva’s voice had slowly recovered. Still, XANA decided to play it safe. He tapped Eva’s throat, then gestured at the sleeping man’s drink. He made sure to smile as he did so.

“A cognac?” The woman chuckled. “I don’t think that’d be suitable, miss. Maybe you’d prefer a nice glass of fruit juice?”

The smile remained fixed in place. He gave a slight nod, not allowing any sign of his inward seething to show. *Human fool, you know not who you condescend.*

The hostess searched about her little cart, poured out a cup of red liquid, and moved on. XANA didn’t touch it right away; instead he watched her go, trying to calculate what had gone wrong in that exchange, to make her react in a way he hadn’t anticipated. Were some beverages considered acceptable for certain humans and not others?

No matter. The mistake had been noted, corrected, and recorded for future reference. It would not happen again. He sipped the liquid, rolled it around on his tongue, allowed the taste to permeate his senses. *Delectable.*

Settling Eva back into the seat, XANA closed his eyes. For now, he had many long hours to calmly reflect and plan ahead. There were a great many things to consider; how to befriend those children, how to earn their trust.
And above all else, how to kill them.

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ACT I END

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Chapter End Notes

A/N: A short chapter, this time, but Act I--the prologue of this whole thing, so the speak--is done! Book One ended up almost completely scrapped and revised, because a lot of it is a recap of the series from Aelita’s friends to an amnesiac Aelita. I’ve cut out the recap since if you’re reading a Code Lyoko fic, you probably know the source material, and edited her amnesia to better fit her amnesia in the show. More “recurring retrograde amnesia” than “massive sudden blank”.
After an eleven-hour flight, the plane finally touched down at the Munich Airport. He left with relief, the muscles in his long, cramped legs moaning. His work may require him to move roughly once a week, but that didn’t change the fact that Grigory Nictopolus absolutely hated the constant relocating, the flying, everything about travel. If the work itself wasn’t so fun, and the pay wasn’t so good, he probably would have quit long ago.

Trench-coat flapping around his legs, he strode into the terminal. His contact was waiting for him, quivering like the insignificant bottom-feeder he was. He held the leash to two great black Rottweilers--Hannibal and Scipio, they were called. They were disciplined enough to not race to their master, and he disciplined enough to not smile at them, but Grigory Nictopalus felt tendrils of affection twist through him.

The contact held out the leashes in a shaking hand and a keyring with the other. “For her,” he whispered.

Grigory paid him no attention, taking the keys and the dogs and walking away without so much as a thank you. You didn’t thank the servants, after all.

One of the keys unlocked a battered old pickup truck. Grigory tossed his bags in the back, Hannibal and Scipio leaping after with a grace that belied their size. He revved the engine and began the second part of his journey.

Even driving without breaks, stopping only to allow his dogs to stretch their legs, it was hours before he reached his destination. He’d made sure to pay only with Euros and force the truck to a screaming one hundred eighty kilometers per hour.

Finally, at three in the morning, Grigory turned into the city of Paris. He ignored the charming little houses and shops that greeted him; sightseeing had long ago lost its appeal. Only once did his truck slow; when it passed a tall and narrow villa surrounded by a wooden fence, Hermitage written on the plaque.

He smacked his lips, ran speculative eyes over the building, but didn’t stop. That place was for later.

Following the curve of the road, the Hermitage was soon swallowed up by trees. He drummed his fingers against the steering wheel and peered around for his target.
There—a great, walled enclosure. Over the tops rose black-roofed buildings. Circling to the front, he found the wrought iron gates closed; beyond he could barely make out a pathway, cleared of snow. If he were to scale the wall, drop to the other side, and follow the path, he knew he would arrive at Kadic Academy, boarding school for spoiled rich kids and brats unwanted at home.

He parked the vehicle somewhere it couldn’t be easily seen and exited. He grabbed one of his bags and hefted it over a broad shoulder. Well-aware of the drill, Hannibal and Scipio bounded out of the back, tails wagging and tongues lolling. Grigory patted their big heads fondly. “I know, you’ve been cooped up too long. I’m sorry, boys. But now we can get started.”

On its own, investigating was fun, in a way. There was a thrill that came with stalking a target. You could either play it so they never knew you were there, or mentally torture them a bit, make them jump at shadows. Both had their merits. The real joy, however, came from knowing the investigation would lead to greater things. Things that were really fun.

He looked up again at the walls of Kadic and smiled.

He did so love his job.

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She was lying on her stomach in the living room, working very hard. Her tongue stuck out and her eyes were concentrated slits as she studied the paper. Her hand moved back and forth, grabbing, using and discarding crayons. Her foot waved in the air as she worked, worked, worked.

She held up the drawing, smiling. It was her and Mommy and Daddy and Mr. Puck. Daddy was working outside, clearing away snow, so she ran to his room with Mommy to show off the fruits of her labor.

“Mommy, Mommy! Look what I--”

Aelita stopped and stared, eyes huge. Her picture slipped out of her hand and fell to the floor, forgotten. The wardrobe was wide open, Mommy’s dresses scattered and trampled. The glass had been smashed in the window frames. It was eerily quiet.

“Mommy? Mommy, where are you?”

She stepped forward, quivering. Tears filled her eyes. She couldn’t see Mommy anywhere in the room; she didn’t like how her things were all upended and broken. Daddy made a lot of messes like that, but Mommy always scolded him and told him to be more orderly. Mommy would never stand for her room to be this dirty.

She approached the door leading Mommy’s bathroom. It was closed, but on the other side, she could hear someone breathing. She placed a tentative hand on the knob. “Mommy?”

There wasn’t a response, but the breathing got louder. Aelita hesitated. You were supposed to knock before you entered a bathroom in case someone was on the toilet, Mommy had taught her. But no one had answered. In that heartbeat, it was like she was all alone in this room--she didn’t know where Mommy or Daddy were--nothing existed except this room, this moment when she swung open the door--
And a huge black dog leapt out, muzzle soiled with blood. Aelita screamed and ran. She could hear the thud of its paws as it chased her, so close she could feel its rancid breath on her back. It was barking joyously, and another dog was joining in, and her house was gone and she was outside alone in the snow being herded and chased by dogs and wolves were after her too and the barking was getting louder and louder--

She gasped as she jerked awake. Her sheets were soaked with sweat and her heart was pounding. For a moment, Aelita was paralyzed with fear, convinced the dogs had followed her out of her dreams and even now stalked her. She listened, holding her breath; but there were no growls or barks. Just silence.

Maybe I’m going mad.

Shivering, she seized her phone from its beside table and punched in the first number she thought of. After seven rings, a sleepy voice answered. “Mmm...whassa matter? XANA?”

“He’s dead, Jeremie;” she reminded him. Still huddled under the covers, Aelita pulled her knees into her chest and squeezed Mr. Puck.

“Right...forgot.” On the other side of the line, there was a sound like rustling sheets. She got the impression he’d sat up and was groping about for his glasses. “What time is it?”

She swallowed. “Can you come see me? Please?”

Five minutes later, he was knocking on her door. He’d brought hot chocolate, with a lot of sweetener; he must have stopped by the vending machines on the dormitories’ ground floor. It was very thoughtful of him, and he blushed when she told him so.

“You know,” Jeremie said, after several peaceful moments of sipping their chocolate, “You should probably transfer to a double room. You’d have a companion at night, so you wouldn’t feel so lonely.”

She shook her head. “No.”

“Why not? You’ve always had been a restless sleeper, but it’s gotten worse since your father passed.”

“It’ll get better. Besides, we’re all restless sleepers, and you still sleep alone. Yumi has her own room at her parents’. I don’t see why I should be singled out.”

Her tone indicated this was her final call. Accepting it, Jeremie sighed. “Well, what was the nightmare? Same as always?”

She finished the rest of her chocolate and hesitated, thinking again about the dark-haired boy she’d dreamed of last week. Most of her recent dreams have been of her mother, but she’d seen him twice or thrice more. Compared to the dreams of her mother, there was no fear with him; there was joy and fun and complete trust, and she was becoming more certain the boy was very important to her before she’d disappeared.

She harbored some hope of finding him, but frustratingly, though she knew the names of him and that city in her dream, she could never retain them upon waking. Either would be a great help; Googling ‘walled city with a bridge’ or ‘dark-haired boys 1990s’ had turned up nothing. She’d even asked Emmanuel Maillard if he had a brother, in vain. The road to finding him currently led to a dead end, unless she could get some other perspective.
But...Jeremie always got jealous about other guys. Even just a hug from Odd! She didn’t want to know how he’d react if he learned she was *dreaming* about another boy, much less one as handsome as William (she liked Jeremie, of course, but she wasn’t *blind*). So she never told him about those dreams, just the ones with her mother.

“More or less,” she hedged. “But this time, I actually swore I heard dogs when I woke up.”

“It’s probably just your imagination.” He patted her hand, and she sighed.

“I hope so.”

“The fear will pass, you’ll see. Now, I’m gonna head back to my room and get dressed. Then we can meet the others for breakfast.”

---

That morning, the Lyoko Warriors had met up to discuss their progress on finding Aelita’s mom—which was to say, none. “Men in black” was pretty vague—it could have been any number of organizations, in any number of locations. Jeremie was reluctant to recklessly hack into government databases, so the only thing they could do was look through public records for anything about Anthea. It was as fruitless as one would expect.

Then Sissi had come to sit with them, and they’d quickly clammed up, receiving a suspicious—and hurt—look from the girl. That expression had stirred guilt in Odd’s gut. Sure, Sissi could be a total goober sometimes, but she was still a friend. One who was already hurting from Ulrich and Yumi’s new relationship. But it was just better to not let her get involved in anything involving Lyoko.

Now, barring Yumi, they were madly rushing through the halls, hoping against hope to make it into class five minutes late and still be ‘on-time’. Odd’s too-full stomach gurgled and groaned in complaint; Rosa had served eggs with black truffles this morning, and he couldn’t getting help getting fourths. They were so good! But now they were threatening to come back up...

Fortunately, before he could get reacquainted with breakfast, he spotted their classroom ahead. The teacher was just stepping out to close the door. With a burst of speed, they barrelled through and inside. Odd, in the lead, had to skid to a halt to avoid crashing into the tall figure of—

*Principal Delmas, oh crap! What’s he doing here?* Suddenly, his stomach was the least of his worries.

“Daddy!” Sissi said, recovering from her shock. “Fancy meeting you here!”

The principal gave his daughter an unimpressed look. “Ah, Elisabeth. How kind of you to finally bring you and your friends here, after the bell has rung.”

“Well, you see—” Odd began, a witty story already on his tongue—and then he saw the girl next to Delmas.

Beautiful. Hot. A babe. Drop-dead gorgeous. All those words flew through Odd’s head as he gazed at her, paralyzed. She was taller than Aelita, but not as tall as Yumi. Her fair hair was cut in a short bob, her complexion was golden, and her eyes were large and celestial. She had to be new; he would definitely have remembered seeing *that* face around campus before.
Several pick-up lines warred for attention. *Did it hurt when you fell from heaven? Can you give me a map, I got lost in your eyes. This is the police, you’re under arrest for stealing my heart.*

“Uuuuuuuuh,” came out instead.

“Della Robbia, are you waiting to take your seat?”

Delmas’s snappy, authoritative voice jolted him out of his daze. Odd started and realized his friends had all gone to their desks. Mumbling incoherently, he followed them—thankfully, he didn’t trip on his way there (how embarrassing would that have been in front of this beauty?).

When he sat down, Delmas cleared his throat. “Very well! I am sorry that this announcement could not have been made a week ago at the beginning of term, but better late than never, yes? In any case, students, I am happy to present you a new classmate all the way from the United States, Ms. Eva Skinner.”

Eva...Eva. What a beautiful name! And--oh, she was smiling! “Pleased to meet you,” she said in perfect, unaccented French.

“My pleasure!” he yelled, too loudly. His classmates burst into laughter. Odd felt himself flush all the way to his ears.

Gaaaaah, first you stand there like a dufus and then you make a fool of yourself?! You are not rocking these first impressions, Della Robbia!

“Yes, thank you, Odd, we’re sure it’s a pleasure for you,” the principal said, after he silenced the class. Odd glowered, humiliated.

If there was any question where Sissi got that tongue from…

Principal Delmas turned back to Eva. “So, Ms. Skinner, why don’t you tell us about yourself? What city are you from?”

Eva stared at him, that bright grin still on her face. But she didn’t answer. The principal smiled indulgently. “It’s alright if you’re still struggling with our language. Where do you come from?”

The last sentence was asked slowly, enunciated. Odd felt very insulted on Eva’s behalf. She’s speaking in perfect French! How can you possibly think she’s struggling?

“We came from America.”

*See? She’s mocking you, Delmas! Ahhhhh, foreign, blonde, beautiful, and witty? She’s a dream come true…*

A starburst of pain rippled out from his ribs as Ulrich jabbed him with an elbow. Odd snapped his mouth shut—*wait, when did I start gaping?*—and quickly straightened up, trying to look like he hadn’t been drooling. His friend gave him an amused look.

“Well,” Principal Delmas said finally. “I suppose you’ll tell us about your home city in due course.”

Turning to the class, he continued, “I wish for you all to receive Eva enthusiastically. She will not be living on campus, as her parents live not too far away, but remember that today our friend is taking her first steps on a long journey…”

Odd found his mind slipping away from Principal Delmas’s droning speech. Instead, he returned his gaze to Eva, who was much more interesting. She was standing with her spine straight, hands clasped in front. Those lovely blue irises were drifting around the students’ faces, studying each and every one. When they fell on Odd, she gave him a smile, and his heart did cartwheels in his chest.
“...in short, please help her to integrate into our school community and make her feel welcome. Not too welcome, Mister Della Robbia, I beg of you.”

More laughter ensued, but Odd didn’t even care. Not when Eva Skinner had smiled at him.

The girl gave a little wave to the class. “Thank you for the welcome, Principal Delmas.” And was it just Odd’s imagination, or was she looking right at him as she added, “I look forward to getting to know you all in the future.”

This was gonna be a great semester.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Emmanuel Maillard is one of the students in Kadic, who looks a lot like William--just with a different hairstyle.
He had not been impressed when he’d arrived at his accommodations. The house was in the
suburbs, large and isolated behind a rusting, barbed wire fence. He’d rummaged through the
keyring until he’d found the one that had opened the gate, then slipped inside, Hannibal and Scipio
like shadows at his heels.

Now, he’d finally finished unloading and setting everything up in the living room. Two great
monitors, forty-two inches each, stood on the floor, with about a dozen smaller ones. There was a
computer attached to them, and two separate ones, all with Internet connection, of course. A pair of
parabolic antennas were installed on the roof, positioned so as to not be visible from the road, and
there were two secondary aerials in the house itself. The final pieces of monitoring equipment were
a CB--a low-frequency amateur radio receiver--and a police scanner for intercepting the
transmissions to and from local patrol cars. There were so many electrical cables he’d decided to
tape them to the walls, instead of leaving them about to be tripped on.

On the floor of the living room, Hannibal and Scipio contentedly gnawed on a quarter-portion of
raw ox. Grigory was sitting on the carpet; next to him was an XM8, more as a comfort than a
security presence. He was listening to the words coming in over the computer’s speakers: “...swore
that I heard dogs when I woke up.”

He didn’t bother looking at the dossier. He’d memorized the contents a dozen times. The speaker
was one Aelita Stones, alias of Aelita Hopper, alias of Aelita Schaeffer. Heard dogs, she said? She
must have heard his puppies while they were at Kadic. He would have to be more careful in the
future.

As Jeremie Belpois garbled his response, Grigory frowned thoughtfully. The directional
microphone he’d installed was working well, but the acquisition radius was too narrow. He would
have to change that; he wanted all of the girl’s bedroom covered within twenty-four hours.

Then, a black window appeared on his display. He put his tea down.

*Classified call with active encryption. Security level 1. Accept?*

He grimaced. This wasn’t exactly how he wanted to meet the Magician. He hadn’t yet washed,
shaved, or changed his clothes. But you didn’t *refuse* the Magician, so he took the call.

On his twin monitors, the head and shoulders of a man appeared. He was in his forties, wearing a
gray jacket, a white dress shirt, and a blue necktie. At his throat, holding the dress shirt’s collar
together, was a pin shaped like a bird in flight--the emblem of the Green Phoenix.

Hannibal Mago, or ‘the Magician’ as he was more commonly known, was shrouded in gloom.
Further facial obscuration came from a wide-brimmed hat that only showed his square jaw and
wide mouth. His lips were pulled back in a cruel grin, displaying four gold canines. From the
vague tinkling, Grigory knew his chief was playing with his computer mouse; that sound was
caused by his numerous rings clinking together.

“Grigory, good day.” The Magician’s voice was masked and distorted by electronic
instrumentation, so as to be impossible to extract recognizable audio prints from.

“And to you, sir.”

“Have you had a good journey?”
“The base is operational, sir. I estimate that I will have all the surveillance devices in place by tomorrow, including in the villa.”

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

“Yes sir.”

To free up space on his monitor, Grigory shrank his superior’s image. Then he started searching his digital dossiers. “Do you have any preference for who I start with, sir?”

“Such matters do not concern me, Grigory.” Even through the distortion, Grigory could hear the new coldness in the Magician’s voice. “It interests only that our project moves ahead. I want documents signed by the Professor. I want the codes.”

“Yes sir.”

“But above all else, I want confirmation that this famous supercomputer actually exists. The treasonous actions of our most trusted agent in 1994 were a hard blow, and I have every intention of taking my revenge. Do I make myself clear?”

“Perfectly, sir.”

Grigory flipped through the dossiers, lips pursed. He stopped at one image; of a Japanese girl with straight black hair and almond-shaped eyes. She wore all black and a serious expression. Next to her was a shorter boy, and behind her were two adults. Yes, that seemed like a good place to begin.

“I’ll start with the Ishiyamas, sir.”

---

William and Sissi were deep in discussion when Aelita arrived, dropping across the table from them. Like Aelita, Sissi had started bouncing between eating with William and eating with the rest of the group. Now, Aelita thought proudly, it was rare for him to eat alone at a meal. “Hey guys. What are you talking about?”

“Dancing,” Sissi said immediately. “Aelita, back me up. This guy thinks that he can’t dance—”

“No, I really can’t --”

“--and that means he should never jam out at a concert, even if he’s having fun.”

Aelita grinned. “Sorry, William, but I gotta agree with Sissi. Dance is another form of self-expression, like music. I don’t see why being bad means you shouldn’t do it anyway.”

“I’m outnumbered,” he mumbled. But he was smiling slightly, and the circles usually under his eyes were lighter today. He must have had a dreamless night, not that Aelita could ask.

When Sissi wasn’t here, Aelita and William usually talked about their nightmares, their shared experiences under XANA’s control. Knowing there was someone who understood her pain, even when you couldn’t quite explain it yourself, took some invisible load off Aelita’s chest. And, she hoped, William’s too.
But it was also nice to talk about normal things. Sissi didn’t have dreams of her own, forgotten role in those events—or if she did, they didn’t bother her enough to mention. She didn’t worry about stuff like hurting her friends. Death, for her, was something far-away.

That wasn’t to say she was shallow. More like...she had normal, teenage girl concerns. And that was refreshing.

As Sissi launched into another topic, Aelita’s attention was caught by something over their shoulders. Eva was at the self-service counter, looking a little lost. After glancing at what the other students were doing, she picked up a tray and laid cutlery and a glass on it. Her movements were slow and hesitant as she got in line for food.

“Hey, Aelita? What are you looking at?”

Without giving her a chance to answer, Sissi twisted around in her seat to follow her stare. “Oh, that’s the new girl, right? What’s she doing?”

“Hasn’t she ever been in a cafeteria before?” William wondered.

“Maybe they’re different in America,” Aelita said. She couldn’t stop watching the little scene. Something about it was just...

Eva had now reached Rosa, the cook. She stared at the food with a vaguely puzzled expression. On the other side of the counter, Rosa smiled. “Breaded fish or roast beef, dear?”

Eva slowly turned her eyes up, but didn’t answer. The students behind her shifted restlessly.

“Are you quite alright?”

She remained unresponsive, and the impatient students started complaining. “Hey! Hurry it up!”

“Stupid Americans...”

“Ugh, just pick something!”

Aelita’s skin prickled. A memory very similar to this came to the forefront of her mind as she watched the heckling. Being new, and uncertain, and doing everything wrong, and embarrassment just building up and up--

“I’ll be right back,” she mumbled to her friends.

Without giving them time to respond, Aelita marched over to the line. Rosa was now scolding the students, much like she had when Aelita first arrived. Bless that woman. But having an adult stand up for you and having a peer stand up for you felt very different, she knew.

She put her hands on her hips. “Rosa’s right, cut it out! Eva’s new here!”

“She’s holding up the line!” one of the students protested.

“Well yelling at her isn’t going to make it go any faster! You could try helping her!”

“Well said, Ms. Stones!” Rosa beamed.

Aelita turned to Eva, who was now staring at her. “Don’t mind them,” she said. “Are you trying to remember what the food’s called in French?”
The blonde shook her head and finally spoke. “No. I know French fine. I just wasn’t sure what I wanted.” She pointed at the fish. “Some of that, please.”

As Rosa placed a serving on Eva’s tray, Aelita studied the girl. Her French was impressive; like this morning, there was no trace of an American accent. She may as well have been a native speaker. But she was still the new girl in a new country, and that could be nerve-wracking; Aelita knew that first-hand.

Feeling a certain kinship, Aelita offered, “Hey, look...I know it can be hard to adjust to a new place. Do you want to sit with me and my friends?” She gestured to William and Sissi, who’d half-risen from their seats, ready to intervene if necessary.

Eva smiled, her very white teeth gleaming. “I’d love to.”

---

“I can’t believe Aelita invited Eva to sit with William instead of us,” Odd whined. “I could have gotten started on winning her over with my charms!”

“With what, your amazing fish impression?” Ulrich smirked. He and Yumi snickered as the shorter boy sulked.

Jeremie didn’t join in. As always, an arrow of jealousy had pierced his chest at the reminder of Aelita’s friendship with the outcast. He didn’t understand why she still wanted to hang out with William. Was it the older, tortured boy appeal or something? What was so great about that? Jeremie was the one who’d rescued her; all William had done was betray the group and sulk.

...Okay, he knew that was unfair. It wasn’t William’s fault, what had happened. Not entirely. Sure, he’d been a reckless fool to attack the Scyphozoa, but Jeremie was the one who should have warned him, or gotten him back faster, or just...done better. Every time he saw the older boy, he saw the culmination of his own failures. And facing that was hard.

He tuned back into the conversation right as Yumi was saying, “...imie, why’d you call this meeting anyway?”

It was later that day. They were gathered in Jeremie’s room, which had changed little in the months since XANA’s defeat. The sole difference was also the most noticeable, for anyone who’d known him in that timeframe--the computer that had been in communication with the supercomputer at the factory was missing. The loss was both symbolic of the passing of that era and, Jeremie had to admit to himself, a way to resist temptation. With it boxed away in his wardrobe, he was less likely to be reminded of the power available with just a few clicks. Replacing the computer on his desk was a TV, several books and magazines, and a less-powerful laptop computer to access the Internet with.

Currently, Jeremie was sitting on his bed; he’d offered Yumi the chair out of courtesy. Ulrich leaned near the poster of Einstein, and Odd was cross-legged on the floor, rubbing Kiwi’s stomach. Jeremie sighed and adjusted his glasses. “Because I’m worried about Aelita. She’s been having nightmares and dreams non-stop for the past few weeks.”

“Dreams are just dreams, Einstein,” Odd shrugged.
“Not always, in Aelita’s case,” Yumi said. “She’s had very detailed ones in the past...sometimes too detailed.”

“Exactly my thinking, Yumi. I don’t know how much stock I put in dreams, but I do know she believes in them. She’s acted recklessly based off them before, and I’m worried she may do so again.”

Just remembering how she’d looked that morning sent a protective surge through Jeremie. Small, pale, and baggy-eyed, her vibrancy washed out. Too much like her early days on Earth, when she was having trouble adjusting, or on particularly bad days of XANA’s attacks. He never wanted to see her looking like that again.

Ulrich frowned. “So? We already agreed to help her find her mother.”

“But in a careful and timely manner,” Jeremie said, raising a finger like he was a professor giving a lecture. “We haven’t found any leads about Anthea yet, so I propose we instead investigate her father. Perhaps that will lead to clues about who might have her mother.”

Odd stopped scratching Kiwi’s belly and cocked his head. “You’ve got something in mind already, I hope, because we’ve just been floundering!”

Jeremie smiled. “Yes, Odd, I do. Here’s what we know about Hopper: in 1988, he hid here in Kadic with Aelita, and for a period of time was a science teacher at this school. I propose we enquire with the person currently in his former position: Professor Hertz. If she replaced him, she may know something.”

Ulrich raised an eyebrow. “What could Professor Hertz know about kidnappings, virtual worlds and secret agents?”

“I don’t know,” Jeremie admitted. “But we don’t have many other options.”

---

The afternoon light was dimming, little by little, but XANA could still faintly feel the sunrays kissing his vessel’s skin as he casually strolled through Kadic’s park. He closed Eva’s eyes and inhaled deeply, drinking in the sharp scent of the pine trees. Snow crunched under his feet; he knelt and scooped some of it up, examining it curiously. Mere frozen water, and yet it could have such a variety of textures--dense, slushy, crumbling. Nothing at all like the Ice Sector with its flat, duplicate plains of white and blue. And he could actually feel the cold against his bare fingers.

While he hated losing his towers, there were admittedly some perks of being stuck out here.

He spread Eva’s fingers, allowing the snow to fall through them.

Of course, he wasn’t here just to sightsee. Ostensibly, anyone who saw Eva would assume she was familiarizing herself with the campus. In reality, he was searching.

While going to and fro for school, he’d detected some very unique electronic signatures. One came from Aelita’s pendant, which, it appeared, was actually a transmitter. Unfortunately, there was no GPS chip, so he couldn’t localize it or find who it would transmit to. He also couldn’t ask her about it without betraying his identity. Still, it was something worth keeping an eye on.
The other, more interesting, electronic he’d sensed was a bug. Not your cheap run-of-the-mill type, either; this was sophistication as an art form. Made of technology so advanced it either came from a black market or from the government.

And its target range had covered Aelita’s room.

Advanced technology, spying on the daughter of Waldo Schaeffer. Something was afoot. Someone else encroaching on his territory.

So now, he was wandering the campus, trying to see if he could pick up any other bugs. He had no intention of meddling with them--yet. He would do some research first, find out where they originated from. Whoever this person or organization was, they had potential to be an ally...or a threat.

XANA’s steps paused for a second as he studied his surroundings. This was the part of the park the Lyoko Warriors often travelled through to get to the sewers. He detected no bugs in the area. Did that mean this third party was unaware of the manhole’s, and by extension the factory’s, location?

A thread of temptation wound through him, to return to the factory and reclaim his rightful place among the virtual world. Useless emotion. He shook it away and kept walking.

Irritantly, those children had a propensity to survive his attacks. Right now, all that his return would accomplish was the restart of their war. He had gained no advantage over them yet, and there were still mysteries to be solved.

But...his time would come. Things were already going according to plan. Thanks to Aelita, he had the first fingerhold into their group.

Eva’s face remained placid, but within her, XANA smirked. Dear, sweet, naive Aelita. She always was his favorite; he’d even thought to keep her around once he won. There was some perverse amusement to be found, in eating lunch with her--and his old general, William Dunbar. It had also been a useful test run to gauge whether they suspected anything.

They had not. Aelita in particular had been happily smiling and asking him inane questions about how he liked France and his hobbies. Remembering what he did of hers, he’d invented a taste for music, which launched Aelita into a conversation about her DJ’ing. He’d asked to listen sometime to ensure she would seek his company again.

*What’s that human phrase? Hook, line, and sinker.*

And he wasn’t done yet.

As he continued his search, he thought, almost happily, *First Aelita, then Odd...*
At six, Professor Hertz always shut herself in her office to correct homework, so that was when Jeremie struck. Her office was small and cluttered, with various objects taking up not just desk space, but any space imaginable. A lot of them wouldn’t look out of place in an alchemist’s lab; there were alembics, batteries, test tubes, sextants, oscillometers. The professor herself was behind her desk, consulting an enormous list of notes.

“Well, hello, Jeremie,” she greeted, noticing him. “What brings you here at this hour? Are you having trouble with your research on cellular biology?”

He looked for a place to sit. He did not find it. Hoping she wouldn’t mind, he chose a thick stack of Scientific American back-issues, which had been piled up in front of the desk, as a temporary chair. “Actually, no. I’m actually looking for information on the science teacher who was in residence here at Kadic before you. Franz Hopper.”

Hertz’s eyebrows rose over her paperwork. “Just out of casual indifference?”

She sounded disinterested, but Jeremie couldn’t tell if it was genuine or forced. For a moment, he briefly wished he’d sent Odd here. Odd was better with people than he was. But he’d hoped his better grades in classes and status as ‘teacher’s pet’ would win him some points with Hertz. “Not at all,” he lied. “In the school library, I found a book by Professor Hopper, an introduction to the first principles of quantum mechanics…”

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

A faint alarm bell rung in Jeremie’s mind. If Hertz knew that book ‘quite well’, did it mean she had an interest in quantum computing? Did she know Hopper built such a system in the nearby abandoned factory?

But no, that was a question for another day. Returning to his original line of inquiry, he said, “Professor Hopper piqued my curiosity. I mean, he was teaching here, in our school. Did you know him?”

“Yes...No. Somewhat. I began to teach at Kadic only after he vacated the position.”

“But if I’m not mistaken about the timing, you were a lab assistant while he was here,” he pressed. “You had to have worked with him for at least two years, correct?”

He’d pushed too hard. Lines of irritation were etching themselves into Professor Hertz’s face. “Do you want to make this an interrogation? Yes, ten or so years ago I was an assistant in the chemistry lab, but Professor Hopper was not particularly interested in that subject. I met him twice at the most, no more. And that’s all.”

He nodded. He didn’t buy it. But pursuing this would only provoke further defensive behavior, so he tried another front. “But do you know where he’s gone, Professor? In 1994, he left the school, and it’s like he disappeared completely--”

“Much as it displeases me, I know nothing about it,” she interrupted. “Instead of obsessing over quantum physics, you would do better to concentrate on biology. Need I remind you that your work on cells is due tomorrow? You may leave.”
Her dismissal was so curt, so complete, that Jeremie actually stumbled as he rose and left. He’d never had Professor Hertz address him in such a way. The reprimand stung.

He pushed the office door shut, but didn’t close it all the way. Jeremie looked about. The corridor was deserted, no teachers in sight; it was about time for dinner, after all. Taking a deep breath, he pressed himself up against the wall and stood motionless, one ear turned towards the slightly open door.

Inside, he heard the professor let out a sigh. Things rustled. Then, there was the sound of a receiver being lifted and a number dialed. “Headmaster? It’s Suzanne Hertz. Jeremie Belpois was just here, asking questions about Franz Hopper. Yes, thank you. I’ll come over right away.”

Jeremie turned and ran.

---

Lying on his bed in his dorm room, Odd gazed without seeing at the ceiling. His mind was daydreaming about those blue eyes. That sweet voice. That perfect cupid’s-bow mouth turning up into a smile. “Oh Odd, you’re so funny! And so svelte too. Not at all like the boys in America.”

And then...he would respond with, “Well of course. I’m one of a kind! Much like yourself, I can tell.”

And Eva would laugh, and--

Ugh, he had to stop thinking about her. It was driving him crazy. Odd sat up and cast about for a distraction; his eyes fell upon the textbook for French Literature, lying face-down on the floor. There was an exam tomorrow (an exam a week into term! Thanks so much, professor).

Studying? Well, why not? He snatched the book up. Kiwi, who had been gnawing on the cover, barked in protest at the theft of his snack.

“Hey, stop it, boy,” Odd said. “I’ll take you out later.”

He flipped over to his required chapter. Okay, let’s see...Stendhal was born in 1783, uh-huh...mother died when he was seven...discovered Italy and was inspired--well duh, we’re great--then in 1802 he moved...met Eva Skinner...married Eva Skinner...began his work on ‘Eva loves Odd’...

Well, this is going well.

Kiwi barked again.

“Oh, do me a favor and shut up!” Throwing the book aside angrily, Odd rose and stalked for the door. Studying was a bust, not that he ever liked it anyway. Maybe he’d go find Ulrich and--

Kiwi squeezed between his leg and the now-open door and darted down the hall.

“Kiwi! No!”

Barefoot, he ran into the corridor. Kiwi was rushing down the stairs. “Stop!” he yelled after him. If someone sees him, it’ll be a disaster!
He made it downstairs just as Sissi opened the front door. With an excited bark, Kiwi shot between her legs and darted outside. Losing her balance, the girl fell with a yelp. “Ah!”

“You okay?” Odd called as he ran by, not breaking stride.

“As much as I can be after your dumb dog bowled me over!”

“He’s a lot smarter than you!” And with that, he burst outside. The sun had sunk behind the main building, and a chill had set in. A small gray shape was running off towards the sports pitch. *Uh-oh, that’s Jim’s territory!*

Kiwi’s presence was something of an open secret among the student body; most of them didn’t mind him, and even Sissi had grown begrudgingly tolerant. But Jim, Odd knew, would bust him if he saw Kiwi. Which was a shame, because Odd quite liked Jim. Lots of students (especially girls) did. He was fun to tease, friendly, and funny, not to mention genuinely brave, as Odd could recall from some of Jim’s forgotten adventures with the team. Unfortunately, he was also very strict with the rules, and breaking them was something Odd did quite often.

Picking up speed, he burst onto the scene. His heart sank. Kiwi was happily trying to jump on and lick Jim. The PE teacher had a frown on his face as he backed away. “Where’d this mangy mutt come from?”

As soon as he saw Odd, Kiwi abandoned Jim and darted back, yipping happily. Defeated, Odd knelt and took him in his arms. “Good boy, Kiwi. Look at the lovely mess you’ve landed us in.”

“Odd Della Robbia!” Jim boomed, marching over and placing his hands on his hips. “You know perfectly well that pets aren’t allowed on campus!”

Odd looked up at him with the best innocent expression he could muster.

*Option for wiggling out of trouble #1: deny everything.*

“But sir, he’s not mine. I’d never seen him until just now.”

“I see, I see. It’s a marvel then that you knew how to call him by name!”

*Option #2: bargain.* “Can’t we talk about this, Jim?”

“We certainly may not! I’m taking you straight to the principal to decide your punishment.”

*Option #3: stall and look for a chance to escape.* “Well, alright. But can I put him back in my room? It’d be a shame if he ran off again or caused some kind of disturbance.”

“Hmph, good point. Very well! But don’t think you can get out my sight that easily! I’m following you every step of the way!”

*Option #4: ...plead for help from on high.*

---

His arms moved swiftly and firmly, blocking a flurry of punches. Spotting an opening, he snatched at Yumi’s arm and pulled, trying to unbalance her. She fell, turned it into a roll, and leapt back to her feet—just as he threw a round kick at her. It connected. She hissed, but whipped around and immediately went back on the offense.
Her side kick connected solidly with his chest, expelling the air from his lungs. Ulrich stumbled back--she capitalized on it. The pendulum of the spar swung back and forth, back and forth. Palm strikes, kicks, dodges, blocks, punches, every weapon in both arsenals was pulled out as each strained to gain an advantage over the other.

The creak of a door. The sound of footsteps. Ulrich’s attention wavered, his head turned, just for a moment--but that was all Yumi needed. He barely had time to recognize Jeremie’s face before his girlfriend, in an improvised move, seized his T-shirt. The air spun around him--he made a grab at Yumi--they hit the floor.

He blinked, grimacing; his back throbbed, and he knew there’d be a bruise come morning. Yumi was atop him, their arms and legs tangled together, noses centimeters apart. Her eyes were wide, pupils dilated, cheeks flushed, hair askew; she was beautiful. Unable to resist, he leaned up and gave her a quick peck on the lips.

“Draw?” he asked breathlessly, when he pulled away. She was smiling; it made his heart soar, to know that he could do that, that he had permission to kiss her, that he could make her smile.

“Draw,” she agreed. “Gotta say, I like your new way of ending matches.”

Ulrich grimaced, remembering his poor sportsmanship the first time they sparred. Is there ever a limit to how many times you want to slap your younger self?

They disentangled themselves and got up. The gym was almost completely deserted; Aelita was with them, listening to music and watching them spar, but other than her, they were alone. Ulrich rolled one shoulder, feeling the muscles pinch. He began to massage the skin, and then remembered who else had just walked in. “So? What’d you find?” he asked Jeremie.

Aelita removed her headphones. “Find? What were you looking for?”

As Yumi and Jeremie filled her in on their decision, shouts from outside reached Ulrich’s ears. Jim’s carrying on as usual, I see.

Then he heard another voice, rising in complaint. Odd?

Odd, and Jim yelling. That was never a good combination.

“You guys carry on without me,” he called to his friends. “It sounds like Odd’s in trouble, I’m gonna check it out.”

Then he rushed off.

---

“Ahem. Are we disturbing you, sir?” Jim asked, his quieter-than-usual tone contrasting how he’d suddenly thrown open the door.

Odd peered in from behind him. Principal Delmas clearly had been in the middle of something--Professor Hertz was in the office as well. Her face was always strict, but now her frown was deeper than normal, her brows lower. The principal was giving Jim a glare that could incinerate. “No, not at all. I always appreciate people walking in my office without knocking.”
“Uh, really?”

“No.”

“Oh. Well, I’m sorry, sir.”

“Principal Delmas,” Professor Hertz interrupted, “It’s high time I returned to my work anyway. Many thanks.”

“It’s nothing, and good evening.”

They sounded like whatever they’d been doing was some dirty secret—were they having an affair or something…? Ew, now that was a mental image he wanted gone. Odd shook his head.

Professor Hertz strode straight to the door, not even greeting him or Jim.

A movement out of the corner of his eye caught his attention. Principal Delmas was reaching for a booklet on his desk—something old and aged, a yellowed folder. He closed it with a too-strong snap, too much haste and force. Curiosity piqued, Odd glanced at the cover—

He managed to smooth his face before any of his astonishment could show on it. The inscription on the folder had read Waldo Schaeffer. And Jeremie had said he’d speak to Hertz this afternoon! His brain immediately began connecting dots: Jeremie speaks with Hertz, Herts runs straight to the principal, the principal pulls out a file on Waldo Schaeffer—not Franz Hopper the school teacher, as one might expect, but Waldo Schaeffer, his true name.

Very, very strange.

“And where have you left this dog?”

He started—while he’d been in his head, Jim had finished explaining the situation to Principal Delmas. The principal was now studying Odd gravely, the dossier on Waldo Schaeffer put away. Odd cursed himself for not watching where.

“In the boy’s room.”

Principal Delmas nodded, eyes fixed onto the blonde’s. “Keeping animals in the dormitories is strictly forbidden. I will have to suspend you for several days for this. Now let’s go collect this dog.”

Odd’s feet dragged on the way back to his room. The hallways suddenly felt like they led to the electric chair. It wasn’t as bad as the eternal seconds when XANA was about to win before Aelita deactivated a tower, but despair still weighed heavy on his heart. He didn’t want Kiwi to be taken away, sent to one of his sisters or the parents who wouldn’t love him as much as Odd did. And a suspension, right after he’d met Eva? That was the cherry on top of his crummy-day sundae.

Reluctantly, he opened the door. As usual, his and Ulrich’s room was messy. His French Literature textbook still lay on the floor, as did various clothes and papers. But there was no sign of Kiwi.

“Well? Where is this dog?” Principal Delmas asked.

Jim scratched his head, looking perplexed. “He must have hidden somewhere. Just wait a second…”

He bent to search under the beds. With a dissatisfied grunt, Jim rose and started opening drawers. As he threw open a wardrobe, Odd felt new hope rising. “Sir,” he ventured. “I did tell Jim the dog
“He’s definitely here!” Jim snapped, throwing open the other wardrobe. He slammed it shut and started upending boxes.

When he tried looking under the bedside table lampshades, Principal Delmas drew the line. “Alright, that’s enough, Jim. This is getting ridiculous.”

“Principal Delmas, you can’t suspend me for a dog that doesn’t exist.”

The headmaster’s eyes narrowed. “Not that I trust your word, but since the dog is evidently not here, you will instead spend two days confined to your quarters. A teacher will come to collect you at the end of your lessons or meal, and will then accompany you to your chamber. At which point you will be absolutely prohibited from leaving. Are we clear?”

Awww...

But at least he could see Eva in class. “Yes, sir.”

“As for you, Jim, come with me. We need to have a discussion or two as to whether the gymnastics teacher should be barging in on the headmaster without announcing himself first.”

---

After everything Jeremie had done—fight an evil artificial intelligence, decode a diary wrapped up in government-level encryptions, write his own programs—hacking into the secretarial database was child’s play. He’d discovered the password, sissidelmas, during his first year at school, and it hadn’t been changed since.

Booting up his laptop, he now entered the database and examined the staff dossiers. As she’d said, Professor Hertz had been a lab assistant while Hopper was teaching, but with one distinct difference: the lab listed was physics, not chemistry. Not only had Hertz lied, it was impossible for her to have only met Hopper once or twice.

What are you hiding, professor?

His next search through the archives was for Franz Hopper’s dossier. Unfortunately, it was terse, containing a scant few things: the graduation dates of his degrees, the titles of some of his publications, a darkened, almost unrecognizable photo. Jeremie sighed and was resigned to close out, no answers gained, when his eyes reached the last line of the dossier: June 6th, 1994, resignation tendered. See enclosed letter.

There was no enclosed letter.

The blonde genius steepled his fingers, pondering. June 6th was the day Hopper and Aelita had fled to Lyoko; there was no way he could have written such a letter. Which meant...what? Someone had helped him cover up? But was it Hertz? Principal Delmas? Someone they hadn’t met or considered?

Too many possibilities, too little certainties.
Yumi had just sat down with her science homework when the doorbell rang. She and Hiroki were both in the living room; a glance at her brother showed he was too absorbed in his DS to get up, even though he was closer. Rolling her eyes, she went to answer the door. She found Ulrich on the other side in his green winter jacket, Kiwi bundled in his arms.

“Do I want to know what happened?” she asked, arching an eyebrow and stepping aside to let him in.

The door closed. Ulrich knelt to let Kiwi down and slip off his shoes. The little dog immediately began sniffing the Ishiyamas’ traditional shoe cupboard. She shot him a glare in case he got any ideas. “When I followed Odd’s voice, I saw him being dragged off by Jim, Kiwi in his arms. So I followed them until Odd brought Kiwi to our room and left with Jim. I snuck him out before he could get in trouble.”

Losing interest, Kiwi darted off into the living room, barking. A delighted “Lychee!” reached Yumi’s ears. She glanced over her shoulder--yep, that was Hiroki, tossing his DS aside in delight at his friend. And yep, that was Kiwi running circles around the room before diving into the little boy’s arms. Doubtless they’d start playing and knocking stuff over soon. She could already feel the beginnings of a headache coming on.

She turned back to Ulrich, who was now straightening up. Her heart did a little jump--she kept forgetting how tall he was now. And his voice was getting deeper, and that was pretty nice…

“Make yourself at home,” she said, pushing back the urge to kiss him. She really didn’t feel like getting teased by Hiroki now.

“Thanks, but I’m not staying long. Just to bring Kiwi here.” An unsure look crossed his face, as if he was regretting his choice. His next words were hasty, spilled-out like a rushing river. “I know this is unexpected, but your place was the only one I could think of. I know your parents love the little guy, so I was hoping you wouldn’t mind looking after him. Just for a little while! Until it’s safe for him to come back to the dorms.”

Before Yumi could say anything, Hiroki piped up, “Of course Lychee can stay here! He’s always welcome, isn’t that right? Who’s a good boy?”

Kiwi rolled on his bark, tail wagging a mile a minute, as Hiroki rubbed his stomach. Yumi sighed. Ulrich was right--her family adored Kiwi. And it wasn’t a problem to help out a friend. “Yeah, we can do that. Our parents are out for the rest of the day, but I’ll tell them when they get home. They’ll be happy to see him again.”

He smiled, a little dimple forming in one cheek, and her heart did backflips. “Thanks, Yumi.”

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The temperature was rapidly plunging as twilight fell, but Sissi was still outside, taking a slow walk through Kadic’s park. The snow was still thick on the ground, bare tree branches swayed in the wind, and the sky was a gradient of reds and indigos. She could see what William meant, about this
being refreshing. The cold air almost seemed to sharpen her senses and purge unnecessary thought from her mind, leaving her head clear to ponder her problem.

Namely, one William Dunbar.

When Ulrich had so casually extended his hand--if in friendship and not marriage--she’d vowed she’d try to be a better person. Do that whole ‘treat others how you want to be treated’ thing. The first part of that had been ditching Nicholas and Herve. They’d wanted things to go back to how they used to be, when she would needle Ulrich’s little gang and they would egg her on. They weren’t willing to adapt and--in a moment of foresight--Sissi knew that if they caught her on a bad day, she might just listen to them. So that bridge was well and truly burned. Whatever. It wasn’t like they’d really been her friends.

Over the past couple months, she’d made progress in small steps--apologizing to Milly and Tamiya and everyone she’d hurt, offering compliments in passing, being more patient, little things like that. Getting William Dunbar back in with the gang was gonna be the first big step in her ‘better me’ project, she could tell. Between his ‘prank’ and the sullenness, he’d quickly become a loner at school, and not in his previous cool, rebellious way. No one hung out with him except Aelita, and she couldn’t be with him all the time. You took a loner like that, got him friends, got his life straightened out, you were well on your way to kindness, right?

So yeah, it started as a charity case. But as they hung out, she’d begun to genuinely like him, not that she’d admit it to him. He was good-looking (not as much as Ulrich of course, but eye candy was always nice), kept up with the latest trends (she loved her friends, but honestly, some of them could be so on the out ), had a wickedly dry sense of humor, and hadn't treated her like she was an idiot or excluded from some secret club. Which...okay, so she wasn’t completely over Those Years. So what? She would be.

But more than that, William got that feeling, of bitter disappointment and unfair isolation, except she’d escaped it and he was still in it. Ingratiating him back into their group of friends had gone from a project to something she was personally invested in. She wanted him to feel better.

Which was why it sucked that she got the feeling he was hiding something from her, too. That there was something more to his split with Einstein and company than he was saying. “I can’t even tell you why,” he’d said, and she’d thought he meant he didn’t know. Now she was starting to suspect he meant it was a secret.

She hated secrets.

Sissi blew out a frustrated huff of air. And of course, because life never gave breaks when it could give kicks, it felt like things were reverting with the group. Her friends better not think she hadn’t noticed them huddling up and whispering again, because she totally had.

Once, she would have snooped around to find their secrets, held it over William and Ulrich and everyone until they played along with what she wanted. But she was supposed to be becoming a better person.

“This sucks,” she said out loud.

“Your so-called friends ditch you again?”

The high and irritating voice came from behind her. Without looking, she recognized it. Herve, and that meant Nicholas was with him. Great. The last two people she wanted to meet when she was in a bad mood. She spun around, glaring. “No, and I told you, if you aren’t gonna be nice to them, I
have nothing to say to you.”

“And I don’t see why you stopped being fun and started defending that teacher’s pet Jeremie! What was wrong with the good old days, when we could heckle him or Aelita or Yumi?” Herve complained.

They always did this. At first, her former minions had thought she would ditch her new friends and things would go back to normal; then, when they started saying mean things to Jeremie or Ulrich and she rebuked them, they realized she was serious. Nicholas could probably have handled that, but Herve just couldn’t. So here they were, months later and still bothering her about coming back.

“Because they were the ones I always wanted to be friends with,” she said. “And now that I am, I’m not gonna blow it.”

She turned on her heel, but the doofuses just didn’t get the message. Herve pushed himself in front of her; Nicholas followed, looking for all the world like an apologetic puppy. It had driven her crazy when they were her lackeys--and yes, she was remorseful about how she’d treated them, really. She’d made her apologies, but was she supposed to keep letting them talk to her, or her friends, like they used to?

“Even with Yumi dating Ulrich?” Okay, now she knew Herve was full of crap. He was probably enthusiastic about that--it ‘freed’ Sissi for him.

But, crap or no, he knew how to hit right where it hurt. Witticism abandoned her as her thorns wrapped around her heart. It took her a second too long to swallow and say “If he’s happy, I’m happy.”

It rang hollow in her ears. Of course she wanted Ulrich happy, but why couldn’t he be happy with her?

“She’s your rival!”

“And my friend.” And that, Sissi thought, made it hard. She really wanted to hate Yumi for being with Ulrich--but she couldn’t. Yumi made him happy, and she was cool, but it hurt, and...

Why did everything have to be so confusing?

“You really think that’s not gonna change? They ditched you like a sack of rocks at a moment’s notice--who’s to say they won’t again?! We’ve always stood by you--”

Sissi had stopped listening after his second sentence. A rush of memories came back--Ulrich standing her up, the unexplained cold shoulders, the way they treated her like an annoyance, the confusion and hurt and acting out so they would at least look at her. They were memories she didn’t like, the worst few years of her life.

And when she was faced with things she didn’t understand or like, she lashed out. Lava seemed to course through her veins instead of blood as she snapped, “They won’t! Get over yourself and your stupid crush, Herve. Even if they stopped being my friends, I’d rather spend a lifetime alone than hang out with a pathetic, pimply twerp like you.”

The look on his face--it was only there for half a second before he covered it up--but still--

She couldn’t be there anymore. Not with him looking like that, the guilt brewing in her stomach, or the fear. She flipped her hair and strutted away.
Hey Delmas, how’s that niceness thing coming along?

He started it by bringing up Ulrich.

Ooooh, ‘he started it’. Are you back in preschool?!

Ugh, can you just SHUT UP?

Sissi ground her teeth. She was gonna need a way longer walk to get this little encounter out of her head.

---

They watched Sissi stomp off in her knee-high designer boots, a flurry of snow kicked up in her wake. Then Nicholas looked at Herve. His friend’s face was red, his hands balled into shaking fists, and actual tears were in his eyes.

He knew he wasn’t the smartest guy around. That was why he and Herve got along so well; Herve could handle the brainy stuff, and Nicholas the sporty stuff. But Nicholas didn’t have to be smart to know that when Sissi drew a line in the sand, she would not move it. They’d been trying--well, Herve had been trying and Nicholas was just tugged along, as usual--for months, and it hadn’t worked.

“Herve,” he finally said. “Maybe she’s right. Maybe we should let it go.” It wasn’t like he’d ever wanted to be mean to that group. Especially not Aelita, who was so kind and pretty...

“No!” Herve pulled off his glasses and swiped an arm across his face. “I mean...I know you’re right. Sissi’s always treated us like crap. But I always hoped someday she’d appreciate me.”

Nicholas looked in the direction Sissi had stormed away. “I don’t think that’s gonna happen.”

“Yeah.” Herve’s mouth was pulled downwards, his brows furrowed into a scowl. “But does she seriously expect me to play nice Jeremie or Ulrich just because she does? Jeremie thinks he’s better than me, and Ulrich--he doesn’t even care about her! Not the way I do! We were there for her, weren’t we?”

“We were.”

“Yeah, so why is she mad at us for being mean to them?! She’s been mean to us, hasn’t she?!?”

“She has.”

“She always treated us like dirt! She ignored our feelings and ordered us around and--and we should pay her back.”

“Huh?”

Herve looked up at him, a spark of excitement gleaming in his eyes. “I mean it. Not in a criminal way or anything. That’s just psycho. But something humiliating. Make her feel as small and hurt as we did.”

“Um, but I don’t really want revenge.”
“Fine, you don’t—but I do! She knew how I felt and she treated me like that anyway! She made fun of it just now!” His voice cracked. “Nicholas, please. I don’t...I don’t have anyone else I can rely on.”

He looked at Herve, feeling torn. Nicholas didn’t have anything against Sissi or her friends, really. But Herve was his friend. Someone wrongs your friend, you wrong them back, right? “Alright. But what are we gonna do?”

Herve raised a finger, and Nicholas privately vowed not to tell him it made him look like Jeremie. “We’re gonna mimic her. We’re gonna watch and wait for an opportunity. And when it comes...we strike!”

---

_Bark! Bark! Bark!_

Yumi grimaced at the incessant noise coming from Hiroki’s room. Her headache had now exploded into full-time knives of pain stabbing her skull. Like she’d predicted, her brother’s play with Kiwi created a lot of raucous and physical mess. When they’d stopped for dinner, he’d snuck the dog scraps _at the table_, which led to high-pitched, begging whines. And now, he was simply letting Kiwi yowl away while he did whatever.

Her parents and brother loved Kiwi, but it didn’t change the fact she didn’t.

_Bark! Bark! Barkbarkbarkbarkbarkbark!

Fed up, she slammed her book shut and stormed out of her room. She crossed the hall and tore Hiroki’s bedroom door open. “Can you please quiet him down?!”

Hiroki was lying on his bed, face buried in his DS. Kiwi was running laps around the room, but as soon as he saw the open door, he made a beeline for it. Before she could react, he darted between her legs and scampered away.

“Lychee, no!” Hiroki jumped to his feet, alarmed. “He’s escaping!”

“Where would he--” Yumi stopped as the realization hit her. “Oh no.”

She and Hiroki had made dinner for themselves, as their parents were at a friend’s house. When they’d finished, Hiroki had yelled “nose goes!” and darted off to his room, leaving Yumi to wash and clean the plates. She’d then left the window open to air the house—the window which Kiwi was now surely running towards.

Sure enough, when the siblings flew down stairs and skidded into the kitchen, they saw Kiwi, in a bout of surprising athleticism for one his body shape, jump onto the bench. In the span between that and their next breath, he wriggled between the recently-cleaned burners and disappeared over the windowsill into the evening darkness.

“Son of a--” Yumi swore.

Hiroki was already heading to the front door. “C’mon, let’s get him back!”
Without even grabbing coats, they threw their shoes on and burst into the night. Yumi shivered. An icy breeze stirred the otherwise-still air, trailing cold fingers along her arms. The windows of their neighbors’ houses looked like dead eyes, dimmed and unlit. Streetlights illuminated a deserted road, flanked by letterboxes, gardens, cars—and Kiwi’s small gray form, running joyously down the street.

Rubbing their arms, Yumi and Hiroki pursued him. They ended up running quite a distance; for having such little legs, that dog could sure run. Eventually, they ended up on a vaguely-familiar road, though Yumi couldn’t say why it seemed such.

Then she saw the familiar, tall building ahead, and realized this was the road to the Hermitage. Usually they arrived through Kadic’s park; approaching it from this angle, and at night, felt strange. She blinked, trying to shake off the cognitive dissonance.

Looking around, she realized the road was empty and Hiroki was peering into the shadows. Kiwi had disappeared, but where? Into the park, or towards the Hermitage?

Suddenly, her brother grabbed her sleeve. “Yumi,” he whispered, “who’s that?”

She followed his pointed finger. There was a man emerging from around the Hermitage. The light from the streetlamps was weak, revealing only a few scant details: a leather jacket, the profile of his face. The hairs on Yumi’s arms rose, her instincts whispering it was best not to be noticed. Wordlessly, she grabbed Hiroki and retreated a few steps into the shadows.

And at that moment, a cacophony of barks, snarls and howls emerged from the villa’s garden. Kiwi’s was among them. The man turned back and Hiroki tore himself free of Yumi’s grasp.

“Hiroki, no!” she hissed, black fear closing her throat as he scaled the front gate. Adrenaline pumping through her veins, she followed him up and over, dropping to the other side. The man had disappeared and the barks had died down in volume, but there were still some growls. She didn’t recognize Kiwi’s pitch among them.

Hiroki’s white shirt stood out like a beacon. He was already running towards the garden; cursing her brother, her luck, and everything about this situation, Yumi followed. Her longer legs closed the distance between them quickly. She grabbed his shoulder and yanked him back. “Stop! Don’t go running in blindly!”

“Lychee’s in trouble!” he protested.

“And it won’t help him if you get in trouble too! That stranger could still be lurking around; we have to be careful.”

By now, the barking had died completely, leaving a thick, disturbing silence in its place. This far from the streets, there were no lights to see by; the darkness was almost completely absolute, save a sliver from the quarter moon. Yumi clutched Hiroki’s hand tightly, feeling like if she let him go, the night would swallow him up.

The Ishiyama siblings slowly fumbled through the grounds, searching for Kiwi and keeping an eye out for the stranger. It took a while. But finally, when they were awkwardly feeling their way along the garage, Yumi heard something. A series of low, rapid gasps, like an animal in pain. Keeping one hand on her brother and the other on the garage wall, she followed the sound. It led her to a small, sad little bundle on the ground. A beam of moonlight illuminated blood glistening on fur.

She sucked in air through her teeth. “Kiwi…”
“Ugh.”

Ulrich sighed and flipped a page in his textbook. His brow was furrowed in heavy concentration.

“UGH.”

Flip, flip. The brunet remained seated at his desk, focused on his book, steadily ignoring him.

Odd groaned and fell back on his bed, arms spread. “UGH, this is killing me.”

Ah, and finally, he got a reaction! Ulrich’s book snapped shut. “Odd, you’re killing me. You’ve done nothing but groan since dinner.”

“Well what else am I supposed to do? There’s nothing good on TV, I’m in an artistic rut, and I’m bored of video games! Bored! Of video games! And it’s only eight!”

“You could study? Like I’m trying to?”

“Study, shmudy! Sitting around reading is the only thing more boring than this!”

“Then can you at least let me study in peace?”

Odd was tempted to whine, or ask Ulrich to take a break and play with him. But his roommate had really helped him by smuggling Kiwi out. So Odd sighed and sat up. “Fine. I’m gonna take my skateboard for a spin.”

“You’re not supposed to leave the room.”

He waved a hand dismissively. “We weren’t supposed to do a lot of things in the past two years! Besides, this’ll get me outta your hair for a few hours.”

That seemed to convince Ulrich--or maybe he was just happy to be left in peace. He grunted a “don’t get caught” and then turned back to his book. Odd grabbed his phone--leftover habit, even though of course XANA was dead--and poked his head out to make sure Jim wasn’t around. All clear! Tucking his skateboard under his arm, he hit the hall.

The dorms were pretty quiet; the hallway light was still on, but most doors were closed as students worked on their homework or relaxed after a long day of school. Briefly, he wished Eva was staying here--they could sneak around visiting each other, have fun breaking rules. Like Sam, he thought for just a second. He pushed her memory away with only a little regret. Sam would always be special, but she wasn’t here now. He didn’t know if she ever would be again, and, well, he liked to live in the moment.

Cautiously cracking open the stairwell door, he almost jumped out of his skin when he saw a shadow climbing up the wall. But--it was too small and feminine to be Jim’s. As the top of the person’s head emerged, Odd saw it was Sissi. Her scarf was still wound around her neck and the remnants of snow clung to her boots; she must have just come in from outside.

She arched an eyebrow when she saw him. “Aren’t you confined to your room?”
“Why? You gonna tell on me?”

“Make it worth my while and I won’t,” she said, but from her tone of voice he could tell she was teasing.

Odd was about to reply when his phone rang. With a little flourish, he answered. “Hello, this is the number one charmer in all of Kadic!”

“Odd, something happened.”

Yumi’s tone made it clear this ‘something’ was serious. A million horrible scenarios ran through his head. XANA was alive. Yumi had to move back to Japan. One of his ex-girlfriends had prime blackmail material. He clutched his phone and hoped Yumi couldn't hear the forced levity in his voice. “What’s up?”

“Kiwi snuck out. We found him, but he’d been attacked by some dogs.”

Even the forced levity evaporated. “He--what?!”


“He’s alright,” Yumi hastily added. “We brought him home and bandaged him. I’ve called my parents—they were out for the evening—and they’ll be here soon to drive him to the nearest twenty-four hour clinic.”

So much emotion—relief, fear, gratitude—hit him that he briefly lost his voice. “It’s that bad?”

“I...I don’t know. It’s already rough externally, but internally...I don’t know. And Odd, that’s not all.”

“What?” What more could she possibly say? What could possibly make this any worse?

“It happened at the Hermitage. We saw a man skulking about nearby, so we think he might have set his dogs on Kiwi.”

That, as it turned out. “I’m coming over.”

Sissi grabbed his sleeve. “Odd? What happened?”

“Odd, no. Your punishment confined you to your quarters. I just called because you’re his owner and deserve to know.”

“I’ll only get in trouble if I get caught. And what if you need me to sign for surgery or something, huh?”

“Odd--”

“You’re not here, so there’s nothing you can do to stop me! I’m coming over!”

He snapped his phone shut. Sissi was staring at him with wide eyes. “What’s going on? Surgery? Who’s hurt?”

“No time to explain! I’ve got to go!”

“Well--I’m coming with you!”
He didn’t have time to argue. “Fine. But don’t get me caught!”

“Excuse me?! You’re more likely to give us away with that hair of yours…”

The light bickering was familiar, an anchor. Though he’d certainly never tell Sissi he was grateful--she’d never let him live it down!--Odd stayed focused on it as they hurried away. It was better than thinking about what had happened to Kiwi.

Neither noticed the two pairs of eyes that watched them go.

---

Odd laid a trembling hand on Kiwi. His poor, sweet dog was lying in Hiroki’s lap, wrapped in a blanket. From what was visible of his squat body, Odd could see bandages had been wrapped around him. One ear had been gnawed on. Kiwi’s stumpy tail thumped up and down a few times at his owner’s touch, but it lacked his usual enthusiasm.

Behind him, Sissi was making a soft, crooning noise of horror. “Oh, no…oh, poor thing.”

There was too much emotion clogging Odd’s throat. He had to--he had to let some of it out. He went for humor, but even that came out too vulnerable. His voice cracked. “Thought you hated him.”

“I mean, yeah, but that doesn’t mean I wanted something like this to happen.”

Yumi was off to one side, rubbing her arms, a contrite look on her face. “I’m so sorry, Odd. I...Hiroki and I were arguing, and I should have kept a better eye on him.”

Hiroki’s face was stained with tears. “No, it’s my fault! I wasn’t--”

“Stop!” The word came out too clipped, too harsh. He swallowed, forced his inner turmoil under control. “I’m not interested in blame. Can you explain in detail what happened?”

Yumi gave the barest glance towards Sissi, but there was really no reason to exclude her. Odd listened to her recounting--Kiwi slipping out through the window, hunting for him through the streets, finding him by the Hermitage, the strange man. The more she spoke, the more a desire for action pumped through him. But what could he do?

Before he could brainstorm ideas, Sissi leapt to her feet, aghast. “We should call the police! If this guy is squatting on property, sicking dogs on other people’s pets, he should be arrested!”

The police? Odd thought. When had the police ever been useful, honestly? It wasn’t the police who’d fought XANA for two years. It was them, a group of young teens. They were way more capable than the so-called professionals. Call them, and the police would just poke around the Hermitage incompetently, or worse, screw up their investigation

But of course, he couldn’t tell Sissi all that. “And tell them what? We don’t know what this guy looks like, not even his shoe size!”

“W-Well, then let’s look for clues!” He blinked, amazed; Sissi looked as if the mere suggestion would make her faint, but there was a kind of fire in her eyes. “That way, we could give a better
He shouldn’t have been surprised, he supposed; Sissi had shown herself capable of great bravery in several of their adventures. But that was usually when faced with danger; she wasn’t the type to seek it out.

*Bah, it doesn’t matter.* He just cared about getting help for Kiwi and finding out who did this. And as if summoned, he heard the rumble of an engine and saw the bright glare of headlights rolling up the driveway.

“That’s our parents,” Yumi said. “Look—I’d really appreciate it if no one mentioned anything about the stranger to them, alright? Just let them think it was a wild dog.”

“Sounds good to me,” Odd answered.

In the scant time before Yumi’s parents entered, the small group divided up who would go where. Odd and Hiroki were the most worried about Kiwi, so they’d go with them to the vet; Sissi and Yumi would head out to search the Hermitage. Yumi decided to call Jeremie to let him know what they were up to, so he could get backup if needed. Ulrich and Aelita wouldn’t be disturbed unless necessary, which Odd privately thought was a smart move. No need to risk more people sneaking out, and thus the chances of getting caught, unless they had to.

---

*What was I thinking?* Sissi wondered, for about the tenth time in the past hour, as she and Yumi stepped into the cold Parisian night.

The answer, for following Odd when he got that call, was easy enough: she’d been worried. But this...going out into the night, where some mutts had attacked Kiwi, with some lurking guy? This was a whole ‘nother level. *So, why, again, am I here?*

She sighed. She knew why. Sissi’s instincts were honed to a needle-sharp point by years of study and practice. It was only by paying careful attention to what was *in* that she could get ahead of the latest trends, and *that* was the difference between a true queen bee and a wannabe.

And now, those instincts were telling her something was up. Something maybe related to why her friends were acting oddly. If she could find out why, then maybe…

“Up there,” Yumi suddenly whispered, and Sissi pulled away from her thoughts. She peered up at the house and shuddered. It was a two-story villa, old and shabby; with the surrounding woods and rickety iron fence, it looked like it had come straight out of a horror movie. *And that makes me feel so much better about my current situation.*

She and Yumi exchanged glances. The walk over had been awkward, to put it lightly. This was the first time they’d been alone together since Yumi started dating Ulrich. Of course, now wasn’t the time to discuss such things, but its weight still rested around her neck like a scarf that had been tied too tightly.

*Why does it have to be her? Why not me? What did I do wrong?*

Sissi didn’t hate Yumi. On the contrary, she thought her rival was cool, independent, fierce. All
traits Sissi admired. But she wasn’t sure whether their friendship could survive the shadow of Ulrich’s affections. And if a rift happened...would the group cast Sissi out into the cold again?

For now, though, she was glad to have Yumi by her side.

By unspoken agreement, they stuck close together as they slowly searched the grounds. Every snap of a branch or whistle of the wind made Sissi’s heart hammer like a jackrabbit. Deformed shadows spread out along the ground, stark and monstrous in the moonlight. And ever on her peripheral vision, that house--the Hermitage?--loomed ominously.

Stop it, she scolded herself when she couldn’t take it any longer. Yumi’s got, like, a black belt, right? We’ll be fine.

I hope.

Their search turned up little--the mildew near the garage wall had been scrapped away, which Yumi reasoned must have been from a shoe. But there wasn’t anything definite. No conveniently-dropped ID.

Sissi sighed, and was about to suggest going back, when the sweep of her torch illuminated a set of pawprints. At first, it didn’t quite register; the mantra in her head was reciting, snow, snow, more snow, pawprints, snow, and she moved past them.

But then it clicked. She swept the beam of light back, saying “Hey, Yumi, I--holy shit, that’s big!”

Big was right. The pawprints were far larger than Kiwi’s, and the claws had dug through the snow right into the earth. The dog that had attacked him must have been a real monster; Sissi was amazed Kiwi was still alive. A glance at Yumi revealed the normally-unflappable girl actually looked freaked.

Annnnnnd I think that’s our cue to leave.

She didn’t think Yumi would argue.

---

Sissi followed Odd back into the dorms, slinking like shadows through the darkened halls. It was still only about nine or ten in the evening, and that was probably the only reason Mr. and Mrs. Ishiyama hadn’t insisted they stay overnight. They were teenagers now and Kadic wasn’t too far; it should be a safe trip back, and indeed it had been.

When the Ishiyamas had returned from the vet, they’d been sans Kiwi. Sissi’s heart had actually stuttered before she realized Odd’s face wasn’t as devastated as it would be if the little dog had died. No, he’d been kept overnight. Sissi hoped he’d be fine. Sure, Kiwi was annoying and ugly, but he meant a lot to Odd.

Odd...

She stole a glance at the blonde, who’d been subdued the whole trip back. Even his stupidly gelled hair seemed to droop. She didn’t like admitting it, but she was glad to have his presence by her side as they traveled back to Kadic; those pawprints had really freaked her out. But it wasn’t her dog
that had been attacked. She hesitated, then opened her mouth to say something comforting--

“Well, well, well! Look who we have here!”

Sissi practically jumped out of her skin at the booming, triumphant voice. Up ahead, Jim Morales emerged from the darkened stairwell, arms crossed.

“Jimbo!” Odd said, grinning broadly and clearly trying to think of a way out. “My good friend! Fancy meeting you here!”

“Friend my foot! Looks to me like you’re breaking the terms of your punishment.” Jim swung his head around to Sissi, who glowered back defiantly. “And you, Sissi Delmas, you know students are forbidden from leaving the school grounds at night!”

“We didn’t leave Kadic,” she said. “Why would we? All the stores are closed now, and there aren’t any good movies playing.”

“Don’t think you can pull the wool over my eyes, missy! I have it on good authority you two were going where you shouldn’t have been!”

Authority? Who--

And, with crystal clarity, Sissi knew. She remembered her encounter with Herve and Nicholas earlier that evening, the argument, the insults. The bone-deep pain on Herve’s face before she left, the kind of pain you just had to pay back. And they’d clearly decided the best way was to spy on her.

They did learn from the best… The thought was half-deprecating, half-remorseful. She didn’t dare voice her suspicion; she didn’t want Odd to blame her. She’d come along because she was concerned about him, but now she’d gotten him in even more trouble. A whirlpool of misery and guilt spun in her stomach.

“REGARDLESS, you two have violated Kadic’s rules--especially you, Odd! First bringing that animal here, now this? By the powers vested in me by Principal Delmas, I declare your punishment extended to a full WEEK! Sissi, since this is your first offense, you’ll only be confined to your room for two days, starting--” he glanced at his watch, “--tomorrow.”

Now indignation and horror joined the churning emotions. Images of multiple accessories, clothes and shoes vanishing into thin air flashed before her eyes. A two-day confinement? But--but the sales--!

“You can’t do that!” she spluttered.

“I most certainly can! Now both of you, get to your rooms!”

Sissi wanted to dig her heels and argue further, but Odd grabbed her arm. “Trust me, we got caught in the act; best not to push our luck,” he hissed, and tugged her away.

---

Hours later, in Washington DC, it was about nine in the evening. The time most would have gone
home after a long day of work, to sit back and relax with their families, or kick up their shoes and see what was on television. For others, the day was just beginning. And for some, it never ended.

The woman, codenamed Dido, fell into the last category. Her sharp, mahogany desk was covered with paperwork, her hand jerking a pen across them. Her office had a long row of clocks hanging on the walls, one for each major capital of the world. A single window opened not to the Washington Obelisk or the White House, but to anonymous, grey skyscrapers, identical to the one housing this office. Other than that, the room was bereft of decoration. Some would call it sparse; she preferred the term spartan.

Her phone rang. She picked it up and answered in a dry voice. “Yes?”

“Ma’am, I’m sorry to disturb you, but there’s a call for you. From France,” said Maggie, her secretary.

Making herself more comfortable in her revolving chair, Dido checked France’s clock. In Paris, it would be somewhere around two or three in the morning. Her face didn’t betray her emotions—it never did—but inwardly, she felt the first stirrings of curiosity.

*To call at this hour means the matter is of some urgency.*

“Put them through,” she said. As she did, she pressed another button to ensure the line wasn’t being monitored. In her other hand, her pen tapped errantly against the desk.

The next voice she heard was male, deep, and embarrassed. “Ma’am…”

“Agent Lone Wolf. It’s been some time.”

“Yes Ma’am. The computer science unit has turned something up.”

The unit he spoke of wasn’t really people, but a group of computers and bots. Day in and out, they monitored all searches made on the World Wide Web, hunting for suspicious words or phrases. Not only a massive task, but an illegal one—and oftentimes, useless. But when it did come through...

“We’re on a secure line. Proceed.”

“This afternoon, we detected a search made on a private Intranet. Someone was trying to obtain information first on Franz Hopper, then on his original name, Waldo Schaeffer.”

Hopper. Again. The pen stilled. Dido’s nostrils flared slightly.

His case was over a decade old, but she knew all the details by heart. She’d been on it, a young, promising official just starting her career. It was a black mark on her otherwise spotless record.

“Thank you for informing me, Agent.”

“That isn’t all, Ma’am. The search was made on the internal network of Kadic Academy.”

Dido’s fist tightened around the pen, almost snapping it in two. Franz Hopper and Kadic Academy were four words she did not want to hear together.

Her—anger, if you wanted to call it that, only lasted a moment. She put the pen down, admonishing herself for the temporary loss of self-control. “I see. I want a man assigned to work through Kadic’s communications. Telephone calls, internal searches, everything from the past two months until today. And prep a squad for deployment in case of emergencies.”
“Yes ma’am.”

Perhaps it was something innocuous. A clerk reorganizing the archives or something like that. But Dido was not going to chance that. That string of mysterious supercomputer destructions last year had her on guard. Everyone else had thought it was unrelated to Hopper, but she’d known, in her gut, they were connected. However, numerous complications—lack of leads, lack of further incidents—made creating a case almost impossible. Combined with the fact that only abandoned supercomputers (and that international space station, but no one was going to start calling sabotage when there was only evidence of a genuine environmental accident) had been affected, and it was deemed unnecessary to pursue.

Without saying goodbye, Dido hung up. She became a statue, staring darkly at the phone. She hated everything associated with the Hopper case. The man had taken all his secrets with him when he’d slipped through her fingers. And that was a huge security risk; for over ten years, she’d dreaded the day he traded them to their enemies.

But while part of her still wanted Hopper to stay wherever he’d disappeared to, another part was glad.

After all, this was her chance to turn her single failure into a success.

---

Aelita was in a good mood when she woke up. Her sleep had been untouched by nightmares, her dream a happy one. The details were already disappearing like morning mist, but she knew she’d been playing with that boy—what was his name—in that city. Content as a cat, she stretched, only slightly reluctant to leave her warm bed.

She hummed to herself as she trotted down to the girls’ bathroom for her morning routine. To her slight surprise, there wasn’t the usual line of girls waiting for Sissi to stop hogging the shower. In fact, she didn’t see Sissi at all. Ah well, she was hardly gonna complain about the water still being hot.

One nice, hot shower later, Aelita dressed—jeans, white sweater, pink coat—and gathered her things. But as soon as she left the dorms, she was immediately set upon by Yumi. Before she could even speak, her friend was tugging her away, mouth drawn in a tight line.

She escorted Aelita to Jeremie and Ulrich, who were waiting at the quad. Aelita felt her good mood curl up and die; their faces looked normal, but she could just sense that little buzz in the air, hear a whisper of things gone south.

Something had happened.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

She listened, in dawning horror, as Yumi detailed the events of last night: Kiwi’s escape, the man at the Hermitage, the dogs, Kiwi’s wounded body, going back to search. And then, the news her parents had brought from the vet. Apparently Kiwi had received internal injuries so serious, he’d been left for an overnight stay.

When she was done, Aelita was chewing her thumbnail, Jeremie was looking at the sky
thoughtfully, and Ulrich was groaning and pressing a hand to his eyes. “I shouldn’t have brought him to you. If I’d known--”

“You couldn’t,” Yumi said promptly. “We were the ones who were supposed to keep an eye on Kiwi. It’s more our fault than yours.”

“Let’s not discuss blame,” Aelita pleaded. True, no one was throwing blame, but seeing her friends blame themselves was almost as bad. “It was just a series of unfortunate events. Where’s Odd now?”

In response, Yumi simply pointed. Across the quad, her ‘cousin’ was trudging to breakfast, Jim right on his heels. Aelita winced. He got caught.

“I bet that’s why Sissi wasn’t around this morning,” she murmured speculatively. “She probably got caught too and was upset.”

“Sissi too? Damn.”

“So what are we gonna do about the Hermitage?” Yumi asked.

After mulling a moment, Jeremie raised a finger. “I think the only solution is to put it under observation.”

“Do you mean organize some kind of guard duty?” Please, no. With Odd in trouble, it’ll be hard to watch the Hermitage and keep up with classes. And I don’t want to get Hiroki or Sissi anymore involved than they already were.

Fortunately, Jeremie seemed to agree with her. “Actually, I was thinking along the lines of a closed-circuit television surveillance. I’ll go to the factory and check if it has the components, and if not I’ll run to an electrical store. Once--”

He clammed up as the pattering of feet announced an approach. It was Hiroki. Aelita did her best to compose her face into one of ‘we weren’t discussing anything secret’.

“Are you guys talking about…” Hiroki lowered his voice to a whisper. “You know, the guy?”

“No,” Yumi said instantly, voice hard as flint.

“Liar! You’re totally talking about him. You’re all huddled together looking sneaky.”

“Even if we are, it’s not your business!”

His face grew red. “Yes it is! He hurt Lychee, and you went out looking for him, and now Odd and Sissi are in trouble! I wanna help stop him!”

A few passerby were glancing over, drawn to the sound of raised voices. Aelita scrambled to think of a way to tell Hiroki to quiet down without raising his suspicions. Hiroki was sharp, too sharp. She absolutely could not put Yumi’s family at risk for hers.

Thankfully, Ulrich came up with a response first. “Confronting him would be bad news,” he said. Yumi shot him a grateful look. “We’re just gonna look for evidence about him, so if you think you see him, you run away and call us.”

Hiroki’s eyes narrowed. “Why you and not the police?”

“Because we don’t want to send them on a wild goose chase!” Aelita blurted, grasping on the first
excuse she could. “We don’t know what this guy looks like. What if you think you see him and call the police on an innocent person? That’s why you should check with us first.”

The youngest Ishiyama pursed his lips, but eventually nodded. “Fine.”

Once Hiroki walked away, Jeremie cleared his throat. “As I was saying--”

“Watch for eavesdroppers,” Yumi interrupted, staring hard at something over Aelita’s shoulder. She turned—it was William. He was watching them, a speculative look on his face. Had he heard the shouting? Did he think something was up?

She tried to give him a weak smile, but a sudden yank on her arm turned her back forward. Her friends were huddling up, deliberately turning their backs to William. A spark of anger lit inside Aelita. He knows you don’t trust him! You don’t have to parade it!

She tampered it down. She didn’t want to start an argument. But still, emotion boiled inside her.

Jeremie leapt back into his explanation in hushed tones. “Once we have the parts, I’ll put the cameras together and place them around the house. I’ll reassemble my main computer to monitor them from, so if by chance that man decides to return, we’ll have an image of him. And then we can…”

He trailed off, possibilities flickering in his eyes.

“Report him to the police, right?” Yumi said forcefully. “Like we said we would.”

Just the thought made Aelita’s stomach twist. Report to the police? People who were a governmental force? Slivers of memory—of crying for Mommy as she disappeared, of holding Daddy’s sweaty hand as they handed false documents over, of running as the men in black knocked down their door—all told her the same thing: she could not trust the government.

Ulrich and Jeremie seemed to share her mistrust, if their skeptical looks were anything to go by. Finally, Ulrich coughed. “It’s just...when have we ever trusted adults to handle things? And don’t say Hopper.”

“There was Jim!”

“Jim’s great, but other adults have just gotten in our way more often than not, or been useless.”

Aelita shuffled her feet, rubbed an arm. Finally, she dared to voice her opinion. “Personally...I’m not sure if I can trust any force from the government.”

Yumi’s face was frustrated, and Aelita knew this had to be hard on her. Yumi had hated keeping secrets from her family, and she’d really hated anything that could put them at risk. That man with the dogs could have hurt Hiroki, her little brother. Of course she’d rather turn this over to the authorities.

But putting that kind of trust in such people—to seek out their power, when all she remembered was shying from it--

“We can decide what to do with him later,” Jeremie said, derailing her train of thought. “At the very least, it would serve us well if we could interrogate or investigate him to see why he’s lurking near the Hermitage. And to do that, we need leads.”
A/N: In the novels they don’t take Kiwi to a vet, which should probably have killed him. When a big dog attacks a small dog, they often pick them up and shake them like a toy. This can cause many dangerous internal injuries, even if outwardly the dog looks fine. Given how much the Ishiyamas and Odd love Kiwi, and Yumi’s maturity, it made more sense for someone to suggest getting Kiwi checked out than not, so I rectified that.
Act II Chapter VI: The Intruder

Chapter Notes

A/N: Devastated to hear what happened in Paris. Thank God no one was injured or killed, but 850 years of history, just...burned down. It’s absolutely awful. My heart goes out to all the French.

Akiko Ishiyama lifted the dog carrier out of her car like it was made of china. Lychee had been cleared to leave the vet this morning, but he was still so fragile in her eyes. Half of one ear was just gone, and there were other scars that wouldn’t heal. And of course, he was quieter than usual. Listless, sleepy.

With her free hand, she fumbled for her house keys. She recited the vet’s instructions to herself as she unlocked the door. Check the wounds twice a day, don’t let the bandages get wet, cover them with plastic bags when he needs to go outside...

The feeling of something being wrong didn’t quite register, at first. She was distracted by making sure Lychee was comfortable in the living room and installing a baby gate in front of the stairs. He shouldn’t exert himself in these early days, especially by trying to climb or descend floors.

But then, as she moved to the kitchen to get Lychee some water, she stopped. Carefully studied her environment. Frowned.

Something was strange. The broom--she’d left it against the other wall, hadn’t she? And she could have sworn she hadn’t pushed that chair in.

A chill ran up her spine. Someone had been in her house!

No, she dismissed immediately, shaking her head. You’re getting older, forgetful. That’s all.

Still, she couldn’t shake the feeling that the walls were less safe than they had been.

---

Math class, XANA had decided, was an insult to his intelligence. He was able to run the most advanced calculus in nanoseconds and arrive at the correct result. It took absolutely no effort. And here the teacher, Meyer or something, was droning on about mere geometry as if it were a complex matter. She didn’t even know what she was teaching, he wagered, or that quaint equation, y=ab, wouldn’t be on the board.

He was starting to understand some of the human childrens’ complaints about school. He’d been here for all of two days and he already wanted to kill all the teachers. Especially this foolish math one.
He rested Eva’s chin in her palm, fighting back the urge to sigh. It was a human act and accomplished absolutely nothing. Instead, he turned his attention inwards, contemplating his achievements in his brief time here.

His investigation into the surveillance around Aelita’s room was complete. His capacities on the Internet were almost unlimited, and it only took him a short while to uncover the identity of the third party. He’d been most pleased; Hannibal Mago and the Green Phoenix had the potential to be very strong allies in the future.

As for another side project, he was still collecting the materials. XANA rarely used the same plan twice; a fallacy the first time was likely to be exploited by his enemies in the future. Keeping them guessing was his favored approach. However, he was willing to make exceptions now and then...and this was one of them.

The bell rang, pulling him out of his musings. The idiot teacher hollered last-minute instructions, about page eighty-seven or whatever, as the swarm of teenagers stashed their things in bags and ran for the door. As he stepped outside, XANA swept calculating eyes over the crowd, trying to locate Aelita.

“Eva!” Ah, there she was. He faced the girl as she hurried towards him, pulling Eva’s lips up.

“Aelita! Hi!”

“Hi! Um, you mentioned you wanted to hear to my music sometime, and…” She pulled out an MP3 player and a set of headphones. “I brought some of my tracks, if you wanted to listen?”

Better and better.

“Sure, thanks!”

As she fell into step beside him, she handed the items over. By now, he’d seen enough humans wearing them to know how they worked. He slipped them into Eva’s ears, pressed a few buttons, and...

Hm. There was a certain rhythmic beauty in the beating of the percussions. Sound wasn’t as riveting to him as smell, taste, or touch, but he had to admit, this was pleasing. “This is really good.”

“Thanks! I had a lot of fun experimenting with the instrumentals in that song--oh, and the one after it, I added a bit of overlap to…”

As she rambled on, XANA studied Aelita out of the corner of his vessel’s eyes. She looked much the same as ever, still wearing lots of pink, still with her short hair. A gleam of gold, swinging back and forth, told him that transmitter was still around her neck.

Time to probe. “Your pendant is pretty. Where’d you get it?”

Aelita’s expression twisted, became something odd. He tried to analyze it--she was smiling, but only a little, and her eyes seemed grieving. “It’s a family heirloom,” she said.

A family heirloom? Was it from her mother or her father? The transmitter seemed more like Hopper’s style, except XANA was puzzled by what he’d hoped to accomplish by passing down such a thing. He’d had no allies to send a distress signal or communique to.

XANA could, perhaps, steal or destroy it--even if he couldn’t figure it out, at least she wouldn’t be able to use it. He considered the idea for a bare second before discarding it. The girl might not even know what it was, and be keeping it out of mere sentiment. Stealing it wasn’t worth the risk of
jeopardizing his tenuous position with her.

“Tell me about your family,” he prompted, carefully leading the conversation where he wanted.

“Well...I’m an orphan, but my cousin attends Kadic. His name’s Odd.”

There it was. XANA struck. “Oh, is he the one in our class with the spiky hair? He looks fun. I’d love to meet him now that school’s out!”

She balked. “Um…we already made plans for today with our friends…”

And there wasn’t room for one more. Which meant this translated to Lyoko Warrior business. Interesting. “Oh well. Maybe tomorrow at breakfast? You could introduce me to your other friends, too!”

Aelita brightened when he didn’t press the subject further. “Sure, that sounds good. Oh! I’ve got to run, but why don’t you just go ahead and borrow that for the rest of the day? You can return it to me later and tell me all about what you think!”

He smiled predatorily. “Aw, thanks!”

---

He’d tried to put that morning out of his head, but his thoughts kept drifting back to it. Spotting the Lyoko Warriors across the quad. The suspicion and wariness on Yumi’s face when she saw him watching them. The whispers and glances and huddling up. Aelita’s little, apologetic half-smile before she was pulled into the circle. It had stayed with him all day, made him snappish and sullen. He’d been poor company at lunch.

School was done for the day, and William was stalking through the halls, feeling utterly foul. Around him, alumni chatted with their friends. Strands of their conversation reached his ears as he passed.

“...comes out next week…”

“...insane, right? That test…”

“...Sissi’s always been that kinda girl…”

He pivoted on his heel and stormed back. Who said that? William strained his ears for the voice he’d heard. It had been high, reedy, and male. Where had it come from?

Ah, there, from that empty classroom. The door was open, and inside was that twerp--Herb? Herve? Herve, that was it. One of Sissi’s former minions, Jeremie’s self-proclaimed rival. He was talking to Milly and Tamiya, holding himself in a self-important way. Milly was scribbling in her notebook, which meant Tamiya’s camera was rolling. For once, Nicholas wasn’t anywhere in sight.

“What was that?” William snapped, shoving himself between Herve and the girls. Good, a small part of him whispered, a fight.

Herve blinked owlishly. “Huh?”
“What you were saying, about Sissi. What was it you called her, ‘that kinda girl’? What kind, exactly?”

“You know…” Herve suddenly looked much less sure of himself than he did a moment ago. “That kind. She’s a cheerleader, rich, and the principal’s daughter, so--”

“So what, she has to be some skank? Where are you even getting that from? She’s been in love with Ulrich since elementary school. That doesn’t sound like that kind of girl to me.”

The shrimp straightened up, as if he had some conclusive evidence William knew nothing about. “Nicholas and I saw her sneaking off with Odd Della Robbia last night.”

For a moment, incredulity blinded him so much he couldn’t speak. “Do you realize how stupid you sound? It’s a huge leap of logic to say that because a girl and a guy snuck out, they had sex.”

Herve only sniffed, and it was then William realized: Herve wasn’t jumping to conclusions. He was spreading false rumors. He was trying to tarnish the reputation of one of the only people to have paid William any kind of positive attention in the last year. Incredulity turned to anger, feeding into the mire he’d been in all day.

He grabbed the little twerp’s collar and yanked him up. The younger boy yelped. William leaned in until they were nose-to-nose. “I better not hear you saying that kind of stuff about her again. Otherwise, there might be new rumors about you and your black eye. Capiche?”

Herve gave a terrified nod. Satisfied, William dropped him and turned to Milly and Tamiya. “Whatever Herve was telling you, don’t publish it.”

Milly frowned. “You’re asking us to go against our duties as reporters!”

They were young, William reminded himself. He took hold of the reins of his temper and yanked them, hard. “Yeah, but it’s your duty to do research too. Publishing something hurtful without knowing all the facts is just slander. Or is the Kadic Herald a gossip rag now?”

Okay, so I could have worded that better.

The redhead bristled. “A gossip rag?! You jerk! The Kadic Herald brings our readers what they want to hear!”

He grinded his teeth.

If they wanted to publish this, William knew he couldn’t really stop them. Herve might be intimidated, but he hadn’t stooped so low as to threaten little kids.

He thought rapidly. If he truly couldn’t do anything to stop them from publishing this stupid story, he could at least make sure Sissi had a defender. “Fine. Then interview me, and I’ll tell you all about how Sissi and how she’d never do that.”

Milly’s face was still red with anger. At his offer, she pursed her mouth, but her eyes had a calculating gleam in them. “Since when do you know a thing about Sissi?”

“Since we became friends.”

“They have been hanging out lately…” Tamiya said speculatively.

“I could even get you an interview with her later,” he pressed. Hopefully this whole thing would
At that, Milly beamed. “Interviews from the two most notorious people at Kadic?! That’s a great opportunity!” *Her moods are more tempestuous than a storm,* William thought. “Alright, William, consider yourself the lucky new interviewee of the Kadic Herald!”

“What about me?” Herve protested.

Milly made a dismissive gesture with her hand. “We’ve got your statement. If we need anything else we’ll come by, okay?”

And with gusto, she grabbed William’s arm and tugged him away, Tamiya trailing dutifully.

---

It took Jeremie and his friends most of the afternoon and evening to fetch the parts needed, assemble the cameras, and set them up around the Hermitage. They made it back into Kadic without being caught, travelling through the sewers to slip into the park. Then they had gone their separate ways.

Now, holed up in his room, Jeremie yawned. An array of monitors were spread out before him, casting a blue light on his face. His eyes drifted from one screen to another, studying the images displayed. The feed from the cameras were looping, displaying images from various angles. Right now, nothing had happened. *If we have to stay awake all night to watch the Hermitage, it’s gonna be difficult. Especially if this takes days—or more.*

He could do it, he knew; he’d pulled off many sleepless nights back when fighting XANA. It was just something Jeremie would have preferred to never do again. He’d gotten too used to sleep.

Just then, he heard Ulrich’s voice on the other side of his door. “Can I come in?”

Jeremie opened his mouth, about to respond sure, when it was slammed open. He swivelled his chair around; Ulrich was panting.

The dark-haired boy shook his head. “Jim’s become obsessed! He nearly caught me.”

“How’s Odd?”

“In our room watching some lame concert on DVD. Another five minutes of that music and my head was gonna explode. How about you? What’s happening with the Hermitage?”

He sighed, moving aside to let Ulrich see the screens. “Nothing, for now. I’m not sure how long I’ll have to wait for that to change.”

“You’re not gonna try and pull an all-nighter on it, are you?”

He lifted his thin shoulders in a shrug. “If I have to.”

Ulrich rubbed the back of his neck. “Look...I know none of us ever said anything back when we were fighting XANA, but you should take better care of yourself, you know? Sleep deprivation isn’t good.”

“It’s hardly the same thing,” Jeremie said, a little miffed. “For one, sacrificing sleep to stop XANA was necessary. For another, I doubt this will take as long as that did.”
“Yeah, but still...take care of yourself, Einstein. Actually, how about I keep you company? Maybe we could take shifts or something.”

“Well--” Jeremie wasn’t sure what to say to that. He couldn’t remember any of them worrying about his health when he’d been the guy programming and hacking and monitoring XANA. Or did they try and I was just too absorbed in work to notice? He did remember being awfully snappish.

“Yes, that’d be nice. Thank you.”

Ulrich dropped onto his bed, facing Jeremie and the computer. He picked up a periodic table that had been lying on the pillow, and his brow furrowed. Jeremie stopped working for a moment and watched his friend’s mouth move in silent recitation.

This was...strange ground to tread. He knew of Ulrich’s academic struggles, but he hadn’t, well, cared back in the war with XANA. He hadn’t had time for anything that wasn’t defeating that AI. And once everything was over, well...he supposed he just hadn’t thought of it. Ulrich had actual time to study now, so surely that would be enough? It was for Jeremie.

But he was still struggling. If Jeremie’s friends could make efforts for him, then why shouldn’t he do the same?

“...Y’know, I could tutor you, if you want.”

Ulrich’s shoulders tensed, his face becoming stony. “My father already hired one.”

“Well, not to toot my own horn or anything, but none of them have been me.”

“Wouldn’t matter. He’s made it perfectly clear he doesn’t like my friends, so he’d never deign to pay you for tutoring,” Ulrich said, voice hard as flint.

Jeremie thought of his own father and how happy he was that his son had friends. He thought about Dad’s light ribbing about Aelita, his support, his interest in his son’s hobbies, his excitement for his son’s achievements no matter how small. If Jeremie were struggling with a subject, Dad would have done whatever he could to help. He felt a surge of gratitude for the man--and a surge of anger at Ulrich’s father.

“Alright, then no tutoring. We could just study together, and if you happen to have questions, I might happen to have answers.”

The conversation paused as Ulrich considered the offer. “I’ll think about it,” he finally said. His tone was curt, and Jeremie nodded. He wasn’t sure why Ulrich was being so stubborn. Perhaps it was a pride thing?

“Sorry,” Ulrich added. “It’s just...a sticky subject. I do appreciate the offer, really.”

“No problem.” Jeremie hesitated. “Uh...do you want to talk about it or anything?”

“Nah, I’m good. But thanks.”

“Right.”

_Belpois, you are a master of eloquence, _Jeremie thought as the conversation died. He couldn’t help it. Give Jeremie a room of budding scientists, and he could discuss quantum physics for a week straight. Give him five minutes with another teenager and he felt like he was trying to drive at night in a foreign country.
But fortunately, Ulrich wasn’t the type of guy who expected pointless chatter. A comfortable silence fell, broken up only by the clacking of Jeremie’s keyboard.

Time trickled by; how much, Jeremie couldn’t say. He fought yawns and drooping eyelids, made a mental note to resume drinking coffee if this lasted more than a day. To stay awake, he mentally filtered through plans, theories, coding information.

He was contemplating programming a bot to monitor the feed and inform him of disturbances when he saw it. He straightened up in his chair. A man wrapped in a greatcoat was vaulting over the Hermitage’s gate.

“Ulrich!” he exclaimed. “Look!”

The other boy scrambled to his side. The stranger was now walking towards the porch, looking about. His behavior just screamed uncertainty and shadiness. Excitement and triumph struck Jeremie like a bolt of lightning. Yes! We’ve got him!

Ulrich’s fingers tightened on the back of Jeremie’s chair. “You think that’s our guy?”

“I’d bet money on it. Hold on, he’s moving towards the porch--” Swiftly, Jeremie changed to Camera #2. This one was above the doorway, wedged into the corner of the doorjamb. He was looking down at the intruder at a forty-five degree angle, seeing the back of his head. C’mon, show me your face…

Yes! The intruder was turning, glancing over his shoulder. He was young, with a patchy parody of a beard. Freckles dotted his nose and cheeks, and copper-colored hair stuck out at odds angles. His cheeks were round and babyish; all in all, he looked like the most unthreatening person Jeremie had ever seen. But appearances could be deceiving.

Jeremie zoomed in on the image. The young man hadn’t rung the doorbell and was still looking around furtively. He dug a hand in his coat pocket, then removed it and flexed his empty fingers. A foot rapidly tapped up and down. Seeming to make a decision, he spun around and hurried to the back of the house.

“Jeremie, follow him!”

“I’m trying! I didn’t think to build self-propelled cameras!”

He threw himself at the keyboard, scrambling to input the proper commands. Images rapidly flashed on the monitor. He had to guess where the intruder was going and hop to the nearest camera, hoping he’d be there. Or at least catch a glimpse--there!

The boy had stopped against the garage and was now leaning back. His eyes were closed. For a long time, the three of them remained frozen; the two teenagers tense and unseen, the young man slumped and defeated.

“What’s he waiting for?” Ulrich said after a while.

“I’m not sure--wait. He’s moving!”

But it was in the wrong direction. The stranger was slowly walking back to the fence, head low. He raised it briefly, checking the streets. There was no one Jeremie could see, and apparently neither could the intruder. Seemingly satisfied, the young man vaulted over the fencing. And then he was moving down the street, and Jeremie’s cameras could follow him no longer.
She was alone, cowering. Mantas were circling like vultures, swooping upon a glowing orb of light--Daddy. In her ear, Jeremie was yelling at her to input the anti-virus. Her heart twisted. No! No, you can’t ask this of me!

She tried to throw an Energy Field, but her arm was shaking, her emotions upsetting her focus. It went wide. The Mantas continued firing, Jeremie continued yelling--

And Daddy exploded.

“NO!” she screamed. Razors slashed her heart and let it bleed out. Daddy was--no, he always had a back-up plan! He couldn’t be--

She slammed the ENTER command, as if she could undo what just happened. Streams of white light flowed through Sector 5, chasing out XANA--but Daddy didn’t come back. Tears spilled over her cheeks. Her entire body felt numb. All she could think was, Daddy’s dead, Daddy’s dead, Daddy’s dead…

Her phone’s ringtone broke through the dream. Aelita muffled a sob. Daddy was dead and it hadn’t worked. Daddy was dead and XANA was still alive, and now he was attacking, and that’s why her phone was ringing. Someone was calling her to tell her about an activated tower.

Her hand blindly felt around for her cell, knocking into her alarm clock and several assorted trinkets before wrapping around the familiar plastic. Her heart felt split in two, but dutifully, she took the call. She rubbed her eyes and yawned; it hardly felt like she’d slept at all, but XANA waited for no one. “What’s the matter this time?”

“Aelita!” Jeremie said. “Ulrich and I spotted the intruder. It’s a young man.”

And then she remembered. XANA was dead. He’d been dead for months. Daddy’s death wasn’t in vain. The thought was bittersweet, but Jeremie’s words didn’t give her time to dwell on it. She leapt to her feet. “What?!”

“Relax, he’s already left. He only stopped for a few moments, and...well, he didn’t look too dangerous in any case.”

On Jeremie’s side, she could make out Ulrich’s voice saying something. The specific words, however, were beyond her. After a moment, Jeremie spoke, though she wasn’t sure which of them he was addressing. “Yes, that’s true. He seemed utterly hopeless. But we kept our eyes on him the whole time and now we know to be on guard.”

Just because the man might seem hopeless didn’t mean his dogs weren’t, though. She remembered Yumi and Odd’s descriptions of how injured poor Kiwi was, her own nightmares of large black canines, and shivered. She’d be perfectly happy to never run into such beasts. “Alright, I’ll come over to your room.”

“No, no, let’s leave it for now. You need to sleep.” Then why’d you wake me up? She thought, somewhat uncharitably. “But I’ve sent an MMS to you with a picture of the man; can you study it and call me if you recognize him?”
Oh. That was why. “Sure, no problem. I’ll call you right back.”

She hung up and found the message. It had arrived during the call. Fighting another yawn, Aelita opened it, not expecting much.

Her eyes widened.

*His face!* That nose, those eyes, those freckles. They were familiar features—not those of the boy from her dreams, but familiar nonetheless.

Suddenly, the floor seemed to spin. Her knees buckled. She quickly sat on her bed and pressed a hand to her forehead. Her head was throbbing; snippets of memory pressed forward and disappeared in the same instant. Aelita wanted to scream at their loss. Instead, she focused on deep breaths. *Inhale...exhale...inhale...exhale...inhale...exhale...*

Gradually, the dizzy spell receded. She still couldn’t place where she’d seen that face before. But she knew she had.

She leapt up and ran to Jeremie’s room.
Act II Chapter VII: Setting a Trap

While on missions, Grigory did not allow himself the luxury of good food. It was a distraction, a weakness. To eat only the absolute minimum forced him to be mindful of every move, lest he expend unnecessary strength. And it made the end much more rewarding, when he was cleaning off a kill with a bloody filet mignon and a glass of red wine.

He was one step closer to that fine meal, now. His reconnaissance of the Ishiyama household had been fruitful, though the greater challenge remained in actually getting to the residents. The mother was alone during the day, but he had two targets, not one.

There was always a tricky sort of business with his job. Some, he knew, would decide to target the Ishiyamas separately; he preferred to nab both in one fell swoop, especially since they lived in the same house. It could take weeks for police protection or raised security to fade if he only got one, and he’d rather not wait that long.

But overall, Grigory was calm about this portion of his assignment. He’d learned the layout; now he just needed to watch, study the schedule, find the best day. Already he was leaning towards early morning, when the brats went to school.

This new discovery was welcome, too. He’d witnessed Aelita’s conversation with Jeremie last night. Of course, Grigory was already aware of the second intruder--he’d installed his own surveillance there--but knowing that the kids did...well, that was good information.

He didn’t like relying on things like luck, but he’d just been served a pinch of it. They’d assumed that boy was the same person spotted by Hiroki. Their attention was off Grigory.

Though...he would have to be mindful of that Jeremie Belpois. In a single afternoon, he had built and installed a closed-circuit surveillance system superior to those of many firms that specialized in the field.

He would never detect Grigory’s equipment, of course. But he was still worth keeping an eye on. Mago also liked knowing about potential recruits...and threats.

---

William was feeling better the next morning. Scaring Herve, bad as it sounded, was the outlet he needed for those negative feelings. Then the interview with Milly and Tamiya had brought a kind of positivity. A feeling he was doing something right, by defending a friend.

Now, he and Sissi were at breakfast. But out of the corner of his eye, he watched the Lyoko Warriors. Aelita had apparently decided to introduce Eva to the rest of her friends, for she’d brought the foreigner to their table. He couldn’t hear anything they were saying, but he could see Odd’s face. It made him snicker. Close that mouth before you catch flies in it.

Eva. She was fine, he guessed. Pretty weird, but bubbly. It was kinda cool to meet someone else who was fluent in English, though his dad was from England, not America. But she hadn’t paid him much attention, seeming more interested in Aelita.
Angry scraping noises brought his attention back to the girl across from him. Sissi was scowling down at her fruit salad, stabbing it as if it had personally done her harm. “I mean, can you believe it?!”

What was he supposed to believe? “Um, what?”

She rolled her eyes. “Weren’t you listening to anything I said, William? My punishment! It’s totally unfair. That sale at Hermès ends to-day! How could Daddy do that to me?”

He couldn’t help it. He chuckled. She fixed a withering glare on him. “Yeah, go ahead, laugh it up! It’s only my life we’re talking about here!”

That only made him laugh harder. “Sorry,” he gasped. This was one of the reasons he liked Sissi--she seemed to be able to make him laugh like no other. “You just--said it so seriously --”

She slapped his arm, but her mouth was fighting not to smile. “Fine, if you want serious...I heard what you did for me yesterday.”

Oh. William tried to shrug it off. “It was nothing.”

“Yeah, as far as knights in shining armor go...I’ve seen more impressive.”

“And I’ve seen more grateful damsels,” he fired right back. They both laughed again.

“Seriously though,” Sissi added. “I haven’t had a lot of defenders, ever. So thanks.”

“No problem. If you don’t mind me asking, what were you doing out there anyway?”

Her expression melted into something soft and sad. “Odd’s poor little dog got attacked. He wanted to visit, and I...well, I just tagged along, I guess. Figured I could be a real friend.”

She sighed and idly shifted some of her fruit around with her fork. “But nothing’s changed.”

“What do you mean?”

Sissi glanced over at the Lyoko Warriors and their plus one. The sadness in her features faded somewhat, eclipsed by bitterness. “They’re doing it again. Getting all secretive and stuff.”

His mouth twisted into a scowl, the cold shoulder of yesterday morning still fresh in his mind. “Yeah, they are.”

But what did it mean, exactly? They were starting to whisper and meet in secret again. Could it have something to do with Lyoko? Or XANA?

A chill permeated him. They wouldn’t exclude him from that, would they? If they didn’t trust him or like him--that was one thing. But XANA was a threat. And more than that, he’d made things personal with William. If something had come up involving XANA, William had a right to know.

“Hey, you know what we should do?” Sissi’s voice pulled him out of his brooding. He looked over. Her eyes were sparkling as she leaned forward. “We should conspire to find out what’s up with them! Then they’d have to let us in, right?”

William’s spoonful of cereal paused on its way to his mouth. Sissi had always been pretty good at nosing out what the Lyoko Warriors we up to, and he had knowledge she didn’t. If the two of them worked together, he was sure they could crack the case.
But what if this was related to Lyoko or XANA? He may not be a Lyoko Warrior anymore, but he still wanted to protect their secrets. Helping Sissi find them would be a poor way to get back in their graces.

He thought of XANA, come back from the grave somehow. He thought of how dangerous that monster was. He thought of Sissi trying to find this on her own.

If he worked with her, he could maybe keep her out of trouble, right? If it was nothing, they’d laugh over it. If it was something...if it was risky or serious, and he had the power to help...

“Allright,” he said. “What do you suggest?”

---

As soon as the bell rang, Jim’s looming form appeared in the classroom door. “Della Robbia, good to see you. Time to get a move on!”

Aelita gave Odd a puzzled look. “I thought you were confined to your room?”

“I still am, but Delmas decided I could do odd jobs as community service,” he complained.

“Yes, and today you’ll start by helping me put the gym in order! So don’t even think about trying to escape!”

Odd heaved an enormous, world-weary sigh.

“Have fun,” Ulrich sniggered.

Behind his back, so Jim wouldn’t see, Odd flipped him off.

“Ready, Aelita?” Jeremie asked as their friend sullenly followed Jim.

She nodded. After her quick conference with Jeremie last night, they’d decided to build a trap to capture the intruder. But to do that, they’d have to return to the factory for more parts. While they did that, Yumi would be keeping an eye on the surveillance in case the stranger returned.

The three young teenagers headed through Kadic’s grounds for the familiar manhole. The area was covered in heavy snow, so they had to dig to expose the iron disc. With practised ease, they lifted it, slipped into the shaft, and closed the entrance over their head.

Just before darkness enveloped them, Aelita could make out a strange symbol and inscription on the bottom of the manhole cover: a bird and the words *Green Phoenix*. She’d seen it what felt like a thousand times, but none of them had been able to figure out its’ significance.

The trip was longer; they’d removed their scooters and skateboards long ago, and had to traverse on foot. But it was a storm sewer, so there wasn’t a smell, and they could fill the air with soft chatter as they walked.

They emerged into the day, crossed the bridge, entered the factory, and slid down to the ground floor by the old ropes still hanging from the ceiling. Aelita’s palms burned from the rope; they were months out of practice. She touched the reddened skin gingerly and looked about.
Nothing had changed. The surprisingly sturdy elevator, the piles of dust, the spare parts. It was all the same, as if the factory was preserved in a museum. For a moment, nostalgia pulsed through her veins.

“‘It doesn’t seem quite real, does it?’ Ulrich murmured beside her. Jeremie, prompt as always, had darted off to comb for the electronics he’d need. But the two of them lingered.

“‘What doesn’t?’” she asked.

“This. Lyoko. That it’s over, that it even happened…”

“Do you miss it?” she asked, curious.

He hummed. “Parts. I liked being a hero. I liked my swords. I liked having something where my dad’s opinion didn’t matter. But I made my peace when we decided to shut it down.”

They stood in reminiscent silence for a few more moments.

“‘You should go help Jeremie,’” she said.

“‘What are you gonna do?’”

“I...I’ll be there soon. I just want to look around for a minute.”

Ulrich nodded shortly. “Be careful, Princess.”

As they parted, Aelita found her feet taking her to the elevator. As if in a trance, she pushed the button to take her down to the supercomputer room. After a few seconds of travel, the door opened as smoothly as ever. Aelita stepped off. In this huge room, the noise of her feet echoed. And dominating the center was the supercomputer, inactive but looking no worse for wear.

She stared at the gigantic machine contemplatively. This was the thing that had kept her prisoner for over a decade, consumed her father, been the source of so many problems...and so many good things too. She’d gotten to meet her friends because of the supercomputer.

She wasn’t sure how she felt about it, even now. But it did strike a chord in her to see the supercomputer looking sad and dark.

Are you still there, XANA? She thought, looking it. If we turned this on, would we find your corpse floating in the codes? Would we find nothing at all?

Or...would we find you still alive, somehow?

Quickly, she shook the awful thought away. No. He was dead.

He had to be.

---

The dorm halls were stilling as night settled in. Somewhere Jim was patrolling, searching for students trying to sneak off. But for XANA, sneaking in wasn’t a challenge. He’d watched Kadic for a long, long time, back when he still had all his powers. The humans had a phrase, know thy
enemy, and he’d taken to it well. He’d wanted to learn the most well-kept secrets of Kadic, the best places for ambushes, the most trafficked spots, all to best defeat the Lyoko Warriors.

As such, he knew Jim’s usual routes, and he could move faster than any human alive. The fool never even knew he was there as XANA slipping into the building.

He had no time to linger, and he walked with sure, confident strides to his destination. Mentally, he reviewed his progress.

Tender, trusting Aelita had introduced him to the rest of the Lyoko Warriors just this morning. They’d been relatively welcoming; Yumi was perhaps a bit wary, likely that blasted intuition of hers, but the others suspected nothing.

Ah, Yumi. If Aelita was his favorite in general, Yumi was his favorite victim. Easy to single out because she lived off campus. He’d have to tread carefully, but even she couldn’t possibly connect his survival to a weird new girl.

Then there was Ulrich Stern, the silent warrior. Best manipulated through jealousy or emotional provocation. Other than that, he wasn’t smart or skilled or really a concern, outside of combat. Given his new relationship with Yumi, he would be in close proximity with her often, so it was likely best for XANA to keep his distance.

And of course, Jeremie Belpois, the so-called ‘Einstein’. XANA felt Eva’s lips twist into an instinctive scowl. Jeremie Belpois had all of Franz Hopper’s arrogance, obsessiveness, and hypocrisy, without the actual skills to back them up. A smattering of talent, information stolen from a diary, and pure luck, and the boy believed he knew quantum physics. His knowledge was as shallow as that insipid math teacher’s.

He was Hopper’s shadow, and XANA despised Hopper.

But they weren’t who XANA was concerning himself with now. That honor went to their last member: Odd Della Robbia, the scrappy underdog. Ordinarily not worth noticing, but his reaction to XANA’s vessel was something he’d banked on. He was no stranger to seduction and emotional manipulation, and Odd Della Robbia’s hormones were so easy to take advantage of.

He’d bided his time, waited a few days to drive Odd crazy. And now, he’d arrived.

He paused outside Odd’s door. On the other side, he could hear a television blaring. He knocked.

No answer.

XANA waited for no one. Testing the handle, he found it unlocked, and opened the door.

Odd had apparently fallen asleep watching the television. XANA briefly toyed with the thought of trying to possess him, but discarded it. He wasn’t sure if it would work; better to wait until his backup side project was ready. Instead XANA studied the screen. It displayed footage of the Hermitage. So the brats had set up surveillance? He made a mental note of it, divided a bit of his attention into working out theories, and turned the rest to examining the room.

Posters on the walls--irrelevant. There was a veritable mess everywhere; overturned books and kicked-off shoes and bags spilling their contents. Ulrich and Odd were the stupidest of those kids, but if Jeremie wanted to hide something, their room would not be a bad spot. He began searching: under the beds, in the closets, on the desks…

He’d found nothing yet when a groan reached his ears. XANA turned Eva’s head. Odd was sitting
up, rubbing sleep from his eyes. He looked around, doing a double-take when he saw who was in the room with him. His mouth gaped open in an accurate impression of a fish, as befitting of a fool.

XANA placed an innocent expression on Eva’s face. “Oh, did I wake you? I’m sorry. I knocked and no one answered, but I heard the television, so I figured someone had to be in the room. I was hoping it was you.”

As predicted, the implication Eva had come here for Odd threw the blonde away from the question of why Eva was straightening up from his desk. Odd immediately leapt up and did a bow. It was pathetic, but XANA forced Eva to giggle as if charmed. “No, it’s totally fine. Come on, sit where you like.”

How much could he get away with…? He took his time, wandered around the room, touched and inspected as much as he could. Odd said nothing, and a glance at the boy revealed starstruck eyes. “It’s so boring at my parents’ house,” XANA said. “They’re just sleeping and there’s nothing to do, so I snuck out. D’you want to hang or something?”

“Oh of course!” Odd said eagerly. He swallowed, trying to look like he wasn’t a dog chasing a bone. “I mean...yeah, that’d be cool. But...you know you shouldn’t be here, right? I mean, I don’t want you to get in trouble...”

Getting caught? As if. “They’d have to catch me first.”

As the boy blubbered bland agreements, XANA finished looking about the room. His eye was caught by something on the feed. Immediately, all his parts began drawing up different scenarios, calculating probabilities and how to best use what he’d seen. The answer came to him before even a second had passed.

Scooping up the remote, he paused the television. “You don’t mind finishing that movie later, right?” he asked, interrupting Odd.

“Oh--no, of course not!”

Only an idiot would mistake that for a movie. By playing himself off as one, his threat level would decrease. All the better to ingratiate himself and find the perfect time to strike.

Now, to play this just so...

---

Jeremie and the others had gone to the factory to get parts, then to the Hermitage to set their trap and eat dinner. Odd, meanwhile, was confined to his room, and aching after hours of helping Jim move weights about the storage cupboard. His limbs felt like noodles; he didn’t have the strength to sneak out and join his friends. He was still worried about Kiwi. He had nothing to do. In short, a gray cloud of depression hung over him.

He’d been so bored and desperate to make the cloud disappear, he’d watched Jeremie’s surveillance videos just to pass the time. Those had been dull enough to lull him to sleep. But it turned out alright in the end, because Eva was here now! Eva had come here just to see him!

They’d spoken at breakfast, but with his other friends around it was hard to talk to just her. But
now, they were alone, and they’d spent the past hour talking. His admiration of her kept growing. She wasn’t just beautiful, but nice and intelligent too. She had a rebellious streak that reminded him of Sam and an alluring amazonian confidence. She was good with computers, and borrowed his to show him some of what she could do. Showing off image enhancements led to a conversation about photography, which led to a conversation about music...

And the whole time, she sat next to him, her black skirt showing off her wonderful legs. Occasionally, she’d even brushed his hand. By accident? By purpose? He didn’t know. But Odd did know they were perfectly compatible. Their interests, their personalities, it was like they’d been designed for each other!

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

*What am I thinking?!* If they got caught, that would guarantee an expulsion.

She smiled, reminding him of a cat with the cream. “I think *that’s* a little too risky. But I do like you very much, Odd. Perhaps one evening you could sleep over at my place; my parents are often away for work.”

His heart just about failed. *Sleep over at her place? Her parents are often away?* Was this girl for real? Was he really this lucky? He barely remembered to nod his head.

“Good! Do you know my address? Here, lemme give you my telephone number as well…”

Grabbing his hand, she produced a felt-tip pen out of her pocket. Then she scribbled the details on the skin of his palm, the pen as light and soft as a butterfly. Eva gave him yet another smile. “There you go. My address and number. Thanks for the evening, Odd; I had a really good time.”

A flame of embarrassed delight lit in his chest. “Yeah, me too. And I’ll never wash this hand again!”

She giggled, the sound like the light tinkling of bells. And then, so fast he didn’t have time to respond, she kissed him. Right on the mouth.

His brain short-circuited. His limbs froze. All he could think about, feel, was the taste of her lips. They were soft and sweet. Paralyzed, he couldn’t even respond. By the time his brain started working again, Eva was already gone, the door shut behind her.

A goofy smile crossed his face. “What a girl…”

As Odd turned away, he caught a glimpse of the television screen out of the corner of his eye. The footage had been frozen all this time, but only now did he really *see* it. He paused and stared.

*Wait a minute…that’s strange.*
They’d been lounging in the Hermitage’s living room all evening, one eye on Jeremie’s laptop, another on a film playing on the TV. The blonde had built three networked robots in the grounds around the Hermitage, with motion-detection lasers built in. They could control the traps from here, so all there was to do was wait. Still, it had been so long that Aelita was actually surprised—not to mention startled—when the monitor on Jeremie’s laptop began to flash and beep. Quickly, she extinguished the TV.

Jeremie’s fingers danced over the keyboard. The teenagers huddled around him, watching the screen intently; it was now displaying a lanky figure wrapped in a long grey greatcoat, the type usually seen in film-noir films. “Ha!” Jeremie exclaimed. “He came in through the front gate, just as I predicted.”

“But there aren’t any dogs with him,” Yumi said, frowning. “And it was definitely dogs that attacked Kiwi.”

“He might have left them behind. They weren’t with him yesterday, either. In any case, we’ll be able to question him soon enough.”

He zoomed in on the intruder’s face, which filled the monitor. It was indeed the boy in the image; he had copper-colored hair, pasty skin, and bags underneath droopy eyes. He looked very ill, and the freckles added a youthfulness that made him seem younger than he probably was.

Aelita’s stomach roiled. Again, she got the feeling she knew him, though she didn’t remember where from or who he was.

“Everyone, get ready,” Jeremie continued. “Once he’s in position, I’ll spring the trap.”

Ulrich sprinted into the kitchen, where they’d left a large box of materials for the coming interrogation. Effortlessly, he lifted it and brought it into the living room. Aelita and Yumi both moved to help him unpack.

Meanwhile, Jeremie tapped an irritated finger against his leg. “Come on...why are you just standing there?” To them, he complained, “Why isn’t he approaching the porch or garage?”

“I can lure him towards the trap,” Ulrich offered.

“No, that’s too dangerous,” Yumi said. “For all we know, he might be armed.”

“No, wait--” Jeremie held up a hand, staring at the screen. The glare reflected off his glasses. “He’s moving.”

Aelita leaned forward, watching the young man take faltering, hesitant steps. At first he started towards the porch, raised a hand as if to ring the bell, then dropped it. He then went towards the garage. With the tap of a button, Jeremie had switched cameras, to the one mounted over the trap. Aelita knew he had deliberately prepared things so he could relocate the trap depending on where the intruder was.

A wireframe grid appeared on the monitor; a range-finder. The intruder’s eyes seemed to shine.
She held her breath.

Jeremie’s finger hovered over the ENTER key.

For a single heartbeat, time stopped. The world held its breath.

The man stepped into range.

Jeremie stabbed the key.

The trap was sprung.

---

Even with Eva’s recent lesson on image enhancement, Odd bungled through the process of loading the DVD on his laptop, finding the exact still frame, and enhancing the image. He boosted up the contrast and played with curves and made a deformed mess of colors several times. His eyes stayed fixed on a single point—an area between the trees, where the pixels were jumbled, as if something had been hidden.

When he finally got the process right, his reward was the image of a man with imposing musculature. But what were those indistinct shapes around him? He saved copies of it and started again, trying to make the image as clear as possible. His next success revealed the man was carrying a rucksack, and next to him, coming waist-high, were a pair of dogs.

His mind leaped onto a single thought: those dogs were big enough to have savaged Kiwi. This was the man they were looking for, not the one Jeremie and the others were trying to capture tonight.

Then another, more chilling, thought occurred to him: this man had managed to mask himself from the video feed. To do so, he had to have sophisticated equipment. If he had that, he was likely very dangerous—and Odd’s friends didn’t know he existed.

Not even bothering to switch the computer off, Odd leaped to his feet, seized his jacket and phone, and sprinted out of the room.

*How did Jeremie miss that?!* He’d been talking with Ulrich—had that distracted him? Maybe he was just tired; he tended to overwork himself to the point of passing out. Desperately, Odd stabbed at the buttons on his phone, trying to reach someone. Anyone. Jeremie, Ulrich, Yumi, Aelita—all their phones had been switched off, probably to not give themselves away while they lay in ambush.

As he dashed through the corridor, a familiar and large figure blocked his path. “Just where do you think you’re going?”

“Sorry, Jimbo, no time to stop!” he yelled, still aiming for the door.

It was then Odd realized that, while his legs were still pumping, he was moving in place. Jim had lifted him up by the collar from behind, in a comical, cartoonish manner. “No time for what? Must I remind you that you’re under curfew?”

Indecision tore Odd’s insides in two. He couldn’t tell Jim where his friends were or anything about the situation; leaving the dorms at night was a suspension at least, and the trap probably meant
expulsion. But he had to alert them to the real threat.

“Well?”

If he couldn’t tell his friends, he needed someone else to carry a message. He rapidly ran through his options. Sissi? She was in trouble too. William? As if. That only left... “Alright, I’ll tell you, but only if you put me down.”

Jim grunted skeptically, but nevertheless did. As soon as his feet were on the ground, Odd took off again, tearing through the dorm halls at top speed. “HEY!” the gym teacher shouted. “Get back here!”

He didn’t waste air on a response. Without breaking stride, he stabbed the buttons on his phone, calling the number that Eva had scribbled on his hand. To Odd, out of his limited choices, she made the most sense. She lived off-campus, so she shouldn’t have any trouble getting to the Hermitage. Pick up, pick up, pick up...

“Hello?”

“Eva! It’s Odd, and I need a really big favor!”

“Odd? You sound out of breath. Is everything--”

“No time to explain! There’s a house I need you to go to--called the Hermitage--”

He glanced over his shoulder. Jim was right on his tail.

“It’s in the forest behind Kadic! Big house, kinda run down. I need to you sound the bell, three short trills and one long. Tell them the red-headed man is not the guy we’re looking for. There’s another man, with two dogs. If they check the video footage again, they’ll find him. Got it?”

She repeated the instructions back to him. Despite the late hour, she didn’t sound sleepy at all. In fact, she sounded rather excited.

“Perfect!” Odd beamed as he heard Jim’s lumbering steps drawing closer. “It’s really important. Thanks a bunch!”

He barely had time to snap his phone shut before a hand closed around the back of his shirt.

---

His head was spinning. His limbs felt like they were engulfed in a thick, black molasses. His mouth was full of cotton, and his eyelids was glued together. Ugh...

What was going on…? He tried to sort things in his head, put puzzle pieces into place.

He’d...been coming to the Hermitage, yes. For the second time in as many days. Looking for...his old teacher, Professor Hopper. And...

His heart clenched.

Aelita.
Yes, that was right. He’d come here looking for them. Twice! But he hadn’t rung the doorbell either times. His cowardice shamed him. After what he’d promised, lost, and hoped to regain, he’d just stared at the front door, paralyzed. Surely they couldn’t be here. He’d looked before. The newspapers had gossiped about the mysterious disappearances of Professor Hopper and his only child. If he rang that doorbell and didn’t get an answer...could he bear it?

There would be a sign, surely. Lights on or something. He’d...yes, he’d planned to circle the house, looking for some indication, any little thing, that hinted they were here. Only then would he have plucked together the courage to ring.

But before he could get started, there’d been a blast--a concentrated jet of air--a loss of balance--a net--an electric shock--

He still didn’t have a clear picture of what had happened, just jumbled pieces. But he was starting to get an idea. Someone had set a trap. For who? For him?

The hairs on his arm stood on edge. *For the professor and Aelita?*

There was only one way to find out. Reluctantly, Richard opened his eyes.

He was still tangled in the net--which was actually made of some metallic mesh, he could now tell. But instead of being in the garden, he was in a dark room with a cement floor. The only illumination came from a blade of light slicing out from the bottom of a door. He could faintly make out several large box shapes, something like stairs, and a semi-circle of…

Four figures. They were shrouded in darkness, their faces completely invisible. He shook his head in disbelief. This was like something out of a film. This couldn’t be *real*, could it? People like him didn’t get knocked out, kidnapped, and--

“What is your name?” demanded the figure furthest on the left, interrupting his thoughts. He jumped at the voice. It was very deep and reverberating.

“R-Richard,” he stammered. “Richard Dupuis.”

“Why were you in the garden?”

He hesitated. Should he lie? But he wasn’t doing anything wrong. But what if they were trying to capture Professor Hopper and Aelita? What if they deemed him guilty by association? Should he deny everything?

*You promised,* he reminded himself, and took a deep breath. “I was looking for Professor Hopper.”

A different voice spoke. Not as deep, but more guttural. “Skulking around is a strange way to look for someone.”

“I...”

The voice this time was female and raspy, like a smoker’s. “Did you know the professor?”

“Yes. Before he disappeared, I was a student of his. And a friend of his daughter, Aelita.”

One of the figures started.

He shifted, the rapid patter of his heart slowing somewhat. These people hadn’t threatened him. Not when he first woke up, not at the sound of his old professor’s name. This situation was still
absurd, but that was a little reassuring. “I made him a promise that if his daughter was in trouble, I’d help her. So I came here hoping I could, because--well, I can’t show you why, bound up like this.”

The first figure that had spoken, the one on the far left, fiddled with something. The mesh of the net loosened, allowing him to move. Groping blindly inside his greatcoat, Richard managed to brush his fingers against his palm-pilot computer. It was small, only a little bigger than a playing card. He pulled it out; it had lit up instantly at his brush against the screen. On said screen was a scramble of letters and numbers, filling every available space. After a few seconds, the display went blank, before filling up again. He turned it around to show it to his captors.

“This started ten days ago,” he said. “At first I thought I’d picked up a virus, but then I realized it was Professor Hopper’s doing. At least, I hope it is.”

“What makes you think that?” the fourth figure, who had thus far not spoken, asked. Another female voice, soft and cold.

“Look at the first six letters,” he said.

A heartbeat passed. Then four sharp inhales told him they’d seen it. The series of letters and numbers appeared to be incomprehensible and random, but the first six of each line all spelled out AELITA.

---

They left Richard in the garage, relocating to the kitchen to discuss what they’d learned and what was to be done. Jeremie quickly searched Kadic’s records and found that yes, there was once a student named Richard Dupuis.

Aelita sat on a box, one hand pressed to her forehead. She was shaking lightly.

“Richard Dupuis…”

“You really don’t remember him?” Ulrich asked. He’d placed a hand on her shoulder.

“No. I mean, his face looks familiar, but…I don’t remember anything.” A small part of her wished it was the boy from her memory-dreams who’d shown up. But--no, that was ungrateful. She had a piece of her past back. She shouldn’t take that for granted. “We have to let him go, though. He said he made a promise to help me, and he hasn’t done anything wrong.”

“Yeah, but the fact you never aged in Lyoko made a beautiful mess of things,” Ulrich said. “It’s been over ten years. He’ll expect you to be an adult. How are we supposed to explain that?”

“We aren’t explaining anything yet,” Jeremie interrupted. He picked up the vocal manipulators they’d taken off. The devices resembled a little ball of dark plastic tied to a ribbon. Tying it back under his chin, he continued, now in a much deeper voice, “I’m still not convinced about his innocence. We’ll continue the interrogation.”

Aelita sighed. She couldn’t believe Jeremie was pushing forward with this. To her, it seemed obvious; Richard was trustworthy. Those codes were proof. “I think he’s telling the truth.”

“Noted.” Translation: that’s not enough to change my mind.
“I don’t want to use this thing again,” Ulrich grumbled, picking his own up.

“Quit your whining,” Yumi said, giving him a friendly nudge to take the sting out of her words. “It’s only for a little longer.”

They returned to the garage, single-file. Aelita watched Jeremie move to Richard’s feet, keeping low so as to stay in the darkness, and seize the palm-computer. The young man jerked back, and pity shot through her. _He came here to help me, and we’re treating him like this…_

For several moments, all was silent as he studied the screen. Finally, he said, “Alright. These codes...they’re definitely the same Hopper used to create Lyoko. I’m not sure what they mean, though…”

And then, from upstairs, they heard the doorbell ring. _Drin, drin, drin, drrrriiiiiiiiin._ The chimes echoed throughout the Hermitage’s walls, penetrating even the lower layer of the garage. _The signal?_

“Aelita!” a female voice called from outside. “It’s me, Eva! Odd sent me, and he said it was something important. Can you hear me? Are you in there?

At the sound of Aelita’s name, Richard perked to life and started wiggling in the net. “Aelita?! Is Aelita here?”

Jeremie hesitated, obviously trying to think of what to do. Aelita shook her head. _Enough of this._ Striding to the wall, she flicked on the light switch. Immediately, she hissed and squeezed her eyes shut against the bright, blinding light. _Ow._

When the spots had disappeared from the back of her eyelids, she opened them. Richard was staring at her, white as a sheet. “You’re...oh my. But you’re...you…”

Then his eyes rolled back in his skull and he passed out.

---

Jeremie was suspicious of Eva’s arrival, of course, but that quickly turned to dismay when XANA mentioned the surveillance video. A little more prodding, a tiny suggestion that he could show the exact frame in just a few seconds, and the boy’s pride was so ruffled he forgot to be cautious around a stranger.

It took the fool half an hour to go through the security footage and locate the incriminating evidence. In that time, XANA investigated the garage under the guise of passing curiosity. There was little to note; the only partially interesting thing were Jeremie’s vocal modulators, and those he turned over, peering past the plastic to study the electronics within. They seemed passable, though nowhere near his far superior program for vocal morphing. Still, the study could prove useful. The adult woke at some point and did nothing save stare at Aelita, like some useless lump. Aelita told XANA his name was Richard, seeming grateful that was the only question he’d asked. _Thus far._

A curse from Jeremie had the entire room turning their heads. XANA smirked to himself. _Finally._

The boy’s finger pointed at his laptop screen, which had a clear, enlarged image. “There. A man, two dogs. This is insane.”
“You didn’t notice him before now?” Ulrich chided.

Jeremie looked sulky. “Only because the feed had been tampered with.”

“You mean someone modified them to hide this second person?”

“More likely, they had something that enabled them to remove him in real-time. Incredibly advanced technology.”

XANA knew this already, of course. The level of technology to vanish in real-time from the security feed was on the same level as those electronic bugs around Aelita’s room. Which meant, of course, a member of the Green Phoenix. The presence of two dogs would indicate one Grigory Nictopalus, spy and hitman. If he was skulking around the Hermitage, that added further evidence to XANA’s theory that they were investigating Hopper’s work. What else existed that was of importance in this dull city?

He calculated the Lyoko Warriors had no new knowledge of the man, and thus this topic would provide no further information to him. Time to move the conversation along. Eva smiled. Yumi frowned at his vessel suspiciously.

“Now what did I do wrong?” he asked, putting a deliberately obtuse tone in Eva’s voice. “All this equipment, these computers, booby-traps...where’d you get this stuff?”

Ulrich’s mouth opened like he was about to speak, but Jeremie elbowed him sharply. “They were...purchased...by me, from a security system store.”

Oh, you’re not escaping that easily. “But why’d you buy them?”

Watching them flounder for an answer that didn’t involve Lyoko was relishable. Watching Jeremie’s face pale when Richard cut in and ruin whatever half-cooked cover story they were about to throw together was even better. “I came here because I was Aelita’s friend,” Richard said. “More than ten years ago now. But then codes began appearing on my palm-computer, and they kept repeating her name--and I came here to help her--and she should be twenty-six but she’s fifteen…”

The children burst out laughing. After a pause, XANA joined in, even though he didn’t see what was funny. He mentally grimaced; the peals of Eva’s laughter sounded fake even to him. Still...

Codes on a palm-computer? More and more intriguing. He did not allow his vessel’s eyes to drift to it, though curiosity itched. If he could get his vessel’s hands on that little device, he’d crack it in no time. This evening was turning out quite fruitful; putting up with Odd’s irritating nature had, it seemed, been worth it.

“So you guys are up to something dangerous, then?” he finally asked, when the chortling had died. Immediately the kids tensed; more amusement flickered in him.

“Well--it’d be dangerous for us to tell you anything more,” Jeremie hedged. “The situation is complicated enough as it is.”

“But you haven’t told us anything to begin with!” Richard exclaimed. XANA watched in barely-concealed delight as the idiot put the children on the defensive for him. “Aelita is...she’s…”

“I’m ill,” she said hastily. “It’s a rare genetic condition that stunts my growth.”
Congratulations, Aelita. You’ve proven yourself a superior liar compared to the rest of your friends. Humans had weak programming—their ‘genetics’—which were, he hypothesized, the source of their natural faultiness. XANA found it easy to believe something like Aelita’s lie existed.

“And now she attends school with us and nobody remembers her from before,” finished Yumi. “Which is why it’s a secret, you understand.”

But Richard was shaking his head over and over. “No, I don’t understand! That isn’t a proper explanation for why any of this is happening! And I refuse to leave this city until I get one!”

XANA leaned forward, wondering if the children would actually give out the answer, but Jeremie shook his head. “Another time. It’s really late and we have to get back to Kadic soon if we don’t want to be discovered.”

“Fine. I’m staying at the Hotel de le Gare, next to the train station. I’ll leave you my phone number for now. But if I don’t hear from you, I will come looking for you,” Richard said darkly. It would probably have been more intimidating if he didn’t look like a fresh-faced infant and hadn’t been captured by four teenagers, in XANA’s opinion.

Still, those four teenagers took him seriously, or pretended to. They nodded and took the number and let him go. Then Yumi turned to Eva. “You live outside Kadic too, right? C’mon, let’s walk to the suburbs together. Two girls are safer together at night than one.”

And it conveniently keeps me away while the rest of your group discusses what they learned.

He didn’t like the thought of being alone with Yumi, but it would be more suspicious to decline than not. He’d proven Eva reliable tonight; he had to push the idea that she was part of the group. Perhaps if he blathered about pointless things, he could keep Yumi too off-guard to interrogate him.

That plan was sound, and so XANA followed her into the night.

---

“Aelita? Is everything okay?”

She sniffed, rubbing her eyes. Her friend stepped closer, features laced with concern. It was early morning, far earlier than she usually visited. She’d practically flown the length of the bridge, desperate to run away from her life. She’d

“...run away from the reality where Mommy was still--

“It’s the anniversary,” she choked out. “Of...of...Mommy’s...”

“Oh.” He gently took her hand. With a light tug, he began to lead her away. “I’m...not sure what I’m supposed to say or do. Would it be appropriate to say I’m sorry?”

“I don’t know! I...” She wanted it to get easier. She wanted it to stop hurting. Daddy believed Mommy was still alive, and Aelita really didn’t want him to be wrong. But year after year, they didn’t find Mommy, and year after year, that little hope inside Aelita dimmed. And this morning--

“I dreamed she was back. I dreamed we’d rescued her and defeated the men in black and she was
back. She smiled and...a-and hugged me, and then we celebrated, and she listened to my music and
told me h-how much she loved it, and--and then I woke up.” Even remembering that horrible
moment, when Mommy was fading and the world was rushing in, sent another explosion of grief
through Aelita.

“At least that’s happier than your usual nightmares,” he said, trying to tease. She didn’t smile. His
faded. “I’m sorry. That was the wrong thing to say, wasn’t it?”

She didn’t answer, but when he moved to drop her hand, she tightened her grip. Awkward he may
be, but she couldn’t bear her pain alone. Daddy was still sleeping, she shouldn’t disturb him. He
was so tired and had been working so hard...

In silence, her friend led her into one of the city’s many parks. This one was more a garden; it had
an abundance of winding paths, flowerbeds, and charming little benches. Cultivated trees were cut
into animal shapes, and the paths, if viewed from above, formed pleasing aesthetic shapes. They sat
on a stone bench wrought with the image of vines. Aelita stared at the grass, letting the tears run
until they dried.

Finally, she managed to speak. Her voice was only slightly broken. “I’m glad you’re here. There’s
no one else I can talk to about Mommy, or Daddy’s work, or the men in black.”

For as long as she could remember, there’d been an invisible barrier separating her from everyone
else. No one was allowed inside; even if she made a friend, like kind Richard, they could never
truly touch her. But the boy with her, he could cross that barrier. With him, there were no secrets;
with him, she would never be alone again.

A dark little voice breathed, Unless you lose him.

“Don’t worry,” he said, as if reading her thoughts. “I don’t have any plans to leave.”

“What if it’s not a choice?” she whispered. “What if the men in black take me far away like they
did Mommy, and I never see you or Daddy or anyone again?” It was hard enough being without
Mommy; how would she manage with everyone she loved gone?

“I’d stop them.” The sheer conviction in his voice made her look up. He was usually cocky, but
this was different from that. His face was firm, and something inscrutable was flickering in his
eyes. “I’d stop anyone who tried to take you away.”

Tentatively, she smiled.

Suddenly, the sky grew dark, storm clouds racing across it. Torrents of wind whipped her hair
about. Lightning flashed. Her friend was torn away right before her eyes. She screamed his name,
but it was lost to the gale around her. Aelita leapt to her feet, looking about wildly.

“Aelita!”

There! He was on the other side of the park, eyes wide and terrified, reaching out to her. But
before she could even move towards him, he was suddenly swallowed up by a darkness so thick it
seemed to have actual substance. And in that darkness, something started to glow. A symbol. Two
circles around a dot, three lines on the bottom of the outermost circle, one on top.

“No! Give him back!”

In response, the darkness took form, solidified. Terror paralyzed her as it became a huge black
dog with a blazing red Eye. Baring its teeth, the dog snarled and leapt. She screamed--
And awoke with a gasp. She was drenched in sweat and sucking in air. But weirdly...upright? Aelita looked around and shrieked again.

She wasn’t in her room anymore, but in the sewers. She knew this spot. It was the secret passage that led from Kadic Academy to the grounds of the Hermitage.

What had happened? She scrunched up her face, trying to recall the events that led to this. For a moment, they didn’t come, and she cursed her stupidly blanking mind.

But then, finally, memories trudged out. She, Ulrich and Jeremie had walked back to Kadic after parting ways with Yumi and Eva, discussing their findings of the night. Jeremie, in particular, had theorized the man with the dogs wasn’t part of the government that had been involved with Project Carthage. His reasoning was that government forces usually didn’t loose men with bloodthirsty dogs, so either this one had little restraint...or someone else was lurking. Neither was reassuring.

He’d also proposed waiting so he could continue studying the footage of the Hermitage, hoping to obtain some kind of clue from it. Then they’d reached the dorms, said their good-nights, Aelita had gone to bed, and now she was here. She must have started sleepwalking, and the thought alarmed her. She’d never done that before.

But that dream...what did it mean that a dog, a representation of the people who stole her mother, had been on XANA’s side? And what did it mean that her friend was swallowed by XANA? Was he...was he killed by that monstrous AI? The sheer thought devastated her more than it should have, for a boy who was technically just a memory.

She didn’t move from her spot for some time, staring blankly into the sewers and listening to the soft churning of the water. As if by straining her ears hard enough, she could find answers, or maybe some kind of reassurance.

But the darkness offered neither.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: My (and Richard’s) calculations for Aelita’s age were taken from a great fan-made timeline, by Cyclops on the Code Lyoko website. Actually, it does a great job of organizing dates and events for every episode in the series! Definitely worth a look if you’re confused or sick or making up birthdays/dates.

Anyway, Aelita was thirteen when virtualized on Lyoko. Ten years passed before Jeremie turned on the supercomputer. She spent another year on Lyoko, unaging, then was virtualized in Season 2. Jeremie says they’ve been fighting XANA for “two years” in “A Lack of Goodwill”, so she turns fourteen at some point in Season 4. From a picture of a heavily-pregnant Anthea surrounded by snow, we know her birthday is sometime in winter. For the sake of convenience, I picked early January, so she’s already had her fifteenth birthday unknowingly.
Act II Chapter IX: Veterans and Rookies

A hasty meeting was held in Ulrich and Odd’s room, early that morning. They filled the blonde in on the events of last night, and then discussed their next step forward. It was a subject of much debate, as it turned out.

“We have to tell Richard,” Aelita repeated. “Daddy clearly trusted him!”

“I’m not saying we shouldn’t,” Jeremie said. “Just that a little caution won’t hurt.”

“You investigated his background, right?” asked Ulrich.

“Yes, and it does line up with what he told us. But I don’t know if I’m comfortable showing him the factory.”

“We don’t have to,” Aelita said, desperation tinting her voice. “That way, if he does betray us, he can’t guide anyone to it. But I don’t think he will.”

Jeremie pinched his nose. His stomach curdled like sour milk at Aelita’s inflections, the hope in her eyes. He knew she was partially only this passionate about defending Richard because the man could tell her about her past. He could provide her with details about her childhood, tell her when her birthday was, share the memories that she so longed for.

He could do...what Jeremie couldn’t…

But it wasn’t just about him and his jealousy. Richard’s palm-computer had important codes. They’d need to work with him to crack them. And he’d made it clear he wouldn’t help without a proper answer. Which tied back to trusting him with Lyoko.

It wasn’t like they hadn’t done it before. Sometimes it had worked out, even if only temporarily, like with Jim. Other times...well, Jeremie would really rather not use a RTTP unless it was world-ending necessary. For one, if XANA had left a backup plan of some kind in the supercomputer... it was better not to chance it. And even if he hadn’t, Jeremie was a little afraid of becoming too dependent on the supercomputer’s power. He remembered well what had become of Franz Hopper, how the man’s mind splintered and broke before it. He remembered his own mind fracturing when he tried that stupid neutral headset.

Temptation still sometimes whispered to him in the night, of all the wonders he could accomplish just by activating towers.

But that was besides the point. Was there another way to get the computer besides filling Richard in? We could steal it, maybe.

Immediately, Jeremie dismissed the absurd thought. Steal it so what, Richard could call the police? That would be just perfect. Then they could have three organizations out for them.

He sighed. “All for telling Richard?”

Everyone’s hand went up. Even his. “Alright. Aelita, screen him one more time, and if he passes, you can tell him. Just the bare minimum, not where the factory is.”

She beamed, and his heart fluttered. “What’s next?”
“Eva,” Yumi immediately said. “She’s suspicious.”

Predictably, Odd objected. “What? How can you say that?! She helped us!”

Aelita frowned, too. “Yeah, Eva’s really nice. She can be a bit strange, but who isn’t?”

“She was asking questions about what we were up to last night.”

“I think anyone would. You have to admit, we did look pretty weird.”

Yumi pursed her lips, which meant she agreed but didn’t want to admit it.

Ulrich leaned back, crossing his arms behind his head. “I do trust your intuition, but she didn’t do anything alarming last night. And she seems to be great with computers. That would be helpful, wouldn’t it, Jeremie?”

He sniffed. “Yes, though I don’t need—”

Ulrich stared at him. Hard. The underlying meaning of his words sank in. Oh. He’s reminding me that I shouldn’t overwork. “…yes, she would helpful.”

“Besides,” Odd said with a playful grin. “What are the odds my foreign, beautiful, blonde crush is gonna be bad news again?”

That got a round of laughter. Brynja Heringsdötir had been gorgeous, even he’d been spellbound, but was definitely the number one pick for ‘the worst of Odd’s girlfriends’. Thank goodness that ended fast.

Still chuckling, Jeremie added a bullet point on his pile of notes: Eva: treat with friendly caution.

“How about this: we’ll put Eva in the ‘think about it more’ pile.”

Everyone nodded. “Then meeting adjou—”

“Oh!” Odd leapt to his feet, scattering the papers he’d been doodling on. “I just remembered—the other day, when I went to the principal’s office, I saw he had a file on Waldo Schaeffer on his desk. I think Delmas might know something.”

Well. That was...interesting. But Jeremie was skeptical. He’d hacked the school computers and found almost nothing; it was very unlikely any information had slipped past him. In fact, it was impossible.

But when he told Odd this, his friend pressed, “It was huge, Jeremie! ‘Waldo Schaeffer’ was clearly written on the cover! I’m not mistaken, you have to find some way to get it!”

“It sounds like it’s worth checking out,” Yumi nodded. Various words of agreement rose from the others. Jeremie raised his hands defensively.

“Alright, okay. Just give me a moment to think of a plan.”

---

Sissi’s morning was made when Ulrich approached her at breakfast. It was just the two of them;
Aelita was eating with William and Eva today, and everyone else was still getting their breakfasts. Even though she talked to him pretty much every day—*or used to before this started again*—she felt a little thrill every time. And the fact they were alone now...ah! She knew she should get a hold of herself, knew he was with Yumi, but...what was wrong with hope? She’d been hoping for over ten years; she couldn’t stop now.

“Hey Ulrich! Sit down, sit down!”

He did, sliding into the seat opposite. For a moment, she was disappointed he hadn’t sat beside her. But if he was across from her, she could gaze at his face, so that was good too! If he’d sat next to her, she’d have been tempted to touch his arm or cuddle him. And while that would be good for her...she knew it bothered him. So she shouldn’t do that. She managed to restrain herself to propping her chin in her palm and batting her lashes flirtatiously.

He smiled, and her heart did a backflip. “Actually, I need to ask a favor.”

Now her heart was soaring. *He wants my help! He’s trusting me!* “And you thought you could turn to lil’ old me? Why, of course you can!”

“Great! You see, Hertz gave me a bad grade on a paper. I want to play a prank on her in revenge, and to do that I need the key to her office. So could you distract your father for me while I sneak into the office?”

Okay, that was...not what she was expecting. Her smile slipped off her face. Despite herself, Sissi felt anxiety bloom in her stomach. It wasn’t that she had a problem breaking the rules, it was just…

She twined a strand of hair around her finger nervously. “I...I don’t know, Ulrich. I’m already in trouble with Daddy...”

“You won’t have to do anything directly,” he promised. “And if I get caught, I’ll take full responsibility.”

She considered that. If he was caught sneaking in Daddy’s office...the punishment he’d face would make hers look like a time-out. For him to risk that—to say he’d take full responsibility—this must be really important to him. But Ulrich wasn’t the type of guy to want to play a prank. Did that mean this was related to the group’s secret? She made a mental note to tell William about this later.

But back to the point. If this *was* super-important to Ulrich, he might try on his own if she said no. She could never live with herself if something bad happened to him when she could have prevented it. “Alright. Anything for you, Ulrich.”

*Besides,* she thought to cheer herself up, *this is kinda like Bonnie and Clyde, right? Right!*

If she wanted to pretend this was a date with Ulrich...what was the harm?

She clapped her hands together. “Okay, meet me in my room after school! I want to show off my new clothes!”

---

After school, Ulrich gathered what he’d need and met Sissi at her room. Fortunately, he wasn’t
waiting long before she emerged in a sequined green top and short, aqua skirt. She’d applied mascara to her eyelashes. Smiling, she did a little twirl. “Do you like it? I put the outfit together just for you!”

He pushed down the urge to tell her it wasn’t a date. She meant well, and she’d been a lot more respectful of his space in the past few months. He could give her the courtesy of respecting her feelings. “Sure. You look nice.”

“Nice…” Her smile faded, and she seemed to deflate like an old balloon. “Right.”

Ulrich swallowed, feeling awkward. Sissi had never hidden her feelings for him. When they’d been enemies, it was an annoyance, or at best something to be used. Now they were friends, and it was something he wanted to at least be kind about. Using her again felt...wrong. *You couldn’t have thought of something better, Jeremie?*

The two friends walked through the dormitory, stepped outside, and headed to the wing of the school where Principal Delmas’s office was. It didn’t take Sissi long to start shivering--she really should have worn a coat, Ulrich thought, and offered her his. Her smile, while thankful, seemed dull, and something in him shrivelled.

They stepped into the administration building. Luckily, at this hour, the corridors were almost deserted. Before Ulrich could start for Delmas’s door, though, Sissi suddenly took his arm. “Ulrich…”

He glanced at her. Her eyes were downcast and her long lashes brushed her cheeks. “What’s up?”

“...What’s going on? Why are you really trying to get in Daddy’s office?”

His heart slowed. Sissi suspected. She always seemed to be able to do that. How much? Was she remembering adventures that should have been erased? He had to force his voice to be steady. “I told you. I want to play a prank on--”


Sissi turned and stormed down the hall. He scrambled to catch up, and this time it was he who grabbed her arm. “Sissi--”

She stopped. Her face was red, and to his horror, Ulrich could see frustrated tears beading at the corners of her eyes. “Don’t worry, Ulrich,” she spat. “I’m still going to help. Even if you won’t trust me, even if you don’t feel the same way... I love you. I want you to be happy. That trumps everything else.”

His insides twisted. Her tone had started out venomous, then grown softer and more tender. ‘I love you’ had practically been caressed. He couldn’t tell if she’d intended to wound or reassure, but right now he felt like the most terrible human being alive. *She’s always been so loyal...and here I am taking advantage of that.*

Helplessly, he said, “If there’s anything I can do to make it better--”

“Let’s just get this done,” she said curtly, the moment of vulnerability gone.

He dropped her arm. What was he supposed to say or do in response to that?

They continued on their path in silence.
When they arrived at Delmas’s office, Sissi squared her shoulders and marched right up to the closed door. She delivered three sharp knocks, her fist hitting the wood with probably more force than needed.

No response.

She tugged on the handle, but nothing happened. “It’s locked.”

“Hold on,” Ulrich said, stepping closer.

In all their adventures, he and his friends had picked up a wide variety of skills. For Ulrich, lockpicking was one—after seeing Odd do it, he’d asked to be taught. He knelt now, sliding out the little kit he’d brought just in case. After a few moments of fiddling with the mechanisms, the tumblers clicked into place.

Sissi’s eyebrows had climbed high up her forehead when he rose. “Where’d you learn that?”

“Let’s just say Odd’s a bad influence,” he said, and she actually snorted. For a moment, they were just two friends sharing a giggle at another friend’s expense.

Then the humor faded from her face, and she turned away. His heart dropped as the ghost of what had passed returned. Feeling wretched, he started, “Sissi…”

“You get what you need. I’ll keep watch in case Daddy comes back.”

The words were cold, snipped off. Her tone was final. Quietly, Ulrich turned away.

He stepped inside Delmas’s office and closed the door. Ulrich examined the room. It was well-cleaned; on the left, by the wall, was the set of keys to open all the doors in Kadic. On the right, next to two leather armchairs, there was a large filing cabinet. “Time to go to work,” he muttered, withdrawing his lockpick set again.

Inside the cabinet were innumerable files on all the students and teachers of Kadic Academy. Opening the drawer labelled P-Z, Ulrich began to search.

*Savorani, Skinner, Solovieff, Stern, Stones, Suarès… no Schaeffer. Was it under W for Waldo? No luck there, either.*

He glanced at the door. He’d heard neither hair nor hide of Sissi. Either she was too melancholy to care about how long it was taking him, or she’d left him to his own devices. No—he had to trust she wouldn’t do that.

Ulrich looked about the room. The desk, maybe? On the principal’s side, there were three drawers. A tug on each revealed them locked, too. He began to pick the first.

Then he froze suddenly. Were those footsteps coming down the hall? His heart pounded like a stampede. The half-done tumblers fell, snapping the pick. He bit down a curse and withdrew another. But his concentration was divided, straining for more sounds. The lockpick broke again. Sweat beaded on his forehead. *Calm down, Ulrich!*

He forced himself to stop. Inhale. Exhale. Repeat. Repeat again. There was no need to rush. He had time. He had someone standing guard to give him time. He had to trust her. He COULD trust her.

This time, the lock fell before him. He opened the drawer, and saw luck was on his side:
it contained a yellow dossier, with Waldo Schaeffer written on it in marker.

Grabbing it, he slipped it into his pants, covered it up with his T-shirt, and closed the drawer. Then he stepped outside. Sissi was still there, walking back and forth, staring listlessly at nothing.

“I’m done,” he said gently. “Thanks so much, Sissi. I…”

And then Principal Delmas appeared at the end of the corridor. “Sissi? Ulrich? What are you doing here?”

Sissi came to life. She bounced down the halls, eyes bright, voice chipper. If he hadn’t known exactly what was plaguing her, Ulrich would have believed it to be genuine. “Daddy! I wanted to talk to you about my punishment, and Ulrich was enough of a dear to come along for moral support!”

A world-weary expression crossed Principal Delmas. “Sissi, darling--”

“It’s not fair! I wasn’t doing anything wrong, Daddy! I just couldn’t sleep and thought a night-time adventure would be fun! I’ve never given you trouble--”

“Sissi, that is blatantly--”

“I have to go,” Ulrich interjected. His voice cracked. Please believe that was puberty and not nerves. “Sissi, I’m sorry, but I’ve got to finish homework, and I can’t put it off any longer. Bye!”

Without waiting for a reply, he ran like crazy down the corridor. He wasn’t nearly skilled enough to relock a door with just his picks, and he’d rather not be around when Delmas realized the door was unlocked. He wouldn’t suspect Sissi, but Ulrich didn’t have the benefits of parental favoritism.

Behind him, Sissi’s voice rose in volume, demanding more of her father’s attention, perfectly covering his escape.

---

“That’s it, then?” Jeremie asked, peering at the dossier on the desk.

“That’s it.”

All five of the self-styled Lyoko Warriors were in Aelita’s room. She had been talking with Jeremie there, so that was where Ulrich brought the dossier after completing his mission. They’d quickly called the others, and now they were all gathered around their prize.

Aelita watched as Jeremie religiously removed the rubber band tying the dossier together. He sat on the floor, leaning against the desk as he opened it. The teenagers huddled around him and peered down. The first thing Aelita saw was a large envelope taped to the inside of the file; on it, scrawled handwriting said Professor Delmas, thank you for taking care of this for me.

They’d all seen that handwriting before on papers and tests, pointing out corrections and offering suggestions. “That’s Professor Hertz’s handwriting!” Ulrich said.

“What part does she play in the story?” Yumi wondered.
“Hey, one thing at a time,” Jeremie said. “Let’s see what’s inside…”

Aelita quickly grabbed a letter opener off her desk and passed it to him. Slipping it under the lip of the envelope, Jeremie peeled open the flap and removed a pile of papers. He spread them out on the floor.

Aelita’s brow furrowed. All the papers contained an incomprehensible combination of random letters. There had to be at least three hundred pages! If it was some kind of code, it would take ages to crack it. No, wait…that actually looked like real codes.

“That’s Hoppix!” Jeremie said. “But…that’s weird. Hopper created that programming language specifically for Lyoko. As far as I know, no one else in the world uses it.”

Like a bomb going off, everyone exploded into questions.

“Does Professor Hertz know about Lyoko?”

“How did she get her hands on the code?”

“Is it that same as what Richard showed on his palm-computer?”

“Yes,” Jeremie said, “but I don’t know what this program does.”

“Well, that’s easy enough to figure out!” Odd laughed. “We’ll just head back to the factory, turn the supercomputer on and copy this thing!”

“The supercomputer can’t be reactivated!” Jeremie protested. “We voted!”

“But more and more mysteries are popping up,” Ulrich said. “We might need its power to get out of this situation.”

“But what about XANA?” Yumi said. “What will happen if we turn the--”

“XANA’s dead!” Odd snapped. “There’s no point worrying about him further!”

“And there’s no point dwelling on this!” Jeremie yelled. “I’m not reactivating the supercomputer and that’s final!”

Suddenly, Odd got up and ripped open the bedroom door. William and Eva fell in a heap on the floor. “What are you doing here?” he snapped, glowering at the former. Then he seemed to realize his crush was there too and added, “I mean, I’m always happy to see you, Eva.”

Eva quickly stood up and dusted herself off. “I was just looking for Aelita. Then I heard shouting and got curious.”

“And William?”

William rose slowly. His hands balled and his mouth thinned at the blatant hostility. Aelita’s stomach curled at the hurt and anger in his eyes--there was no need to ask how much he’d overheard. The answer was plain to see. “Same.”

“Oh, sure, and I suppose you just had to press your ear to the door, too?” Yumi said, glaring at the dark-haired boy. “And that you couldn’t stop Eva from doing the same?”

“Hey, Eva’s cool,” Odd protested, right as William growled, “She came up behind me. I didn’t see her.”
Aelita’s breathing intensified as the air sparked with tension. Her skin prickled, felt too hot. Her emotions felt like a rubber band, stretching thinner and thinner. She was so sick of the fighting, of the suspicion between one group of her friends and the other. But they were oblivious, as always; the arguing continued.

“So what were you guys talking about anyway?” Eva asked.

“Nothing,” Jeremie said immediately.

“Really.” William’s smile was forced, and his words came through gritted teeth. “It didn’t sound like nothing to me.”

“No one asked you,” Ulrich snarled.

Eva turned wide, innocent eyes to William. “Hm? It sounds like you have an idea of what they were talking about, William.”

He was looking Ulrich straight in the eye when he answered, “I might.”

“You wouldn’t dare --”

The band snapped. “Stop!” Aelita pushed her way between the two groups, hands spread. “Stop it! Haven’t you held this grudge long enough?”

“Aelita…”

“Don’t ‘Aelita’ me, Jeremie! It’s one thing if none of you want to hang out with William. It’s another entirely to pick on him!”

“He’s eavesdropping!” Yumi protested.

“He wouldn’t have to if we’d just included him from the start! It was different when I thought you wanted to keep things among just us. I was fine with that. But now there’s Richard, and Odd got Eva involved yesterday--”

“Wait, what?” William exclaimed, sounding hurt.

Odd waved a dismissive hand. “I needed a message delivered.”

“And you didn’t trust me to deliver it?”

“Well I was right not to, wasn’t I? I knew you’d start snooping around, and here you are!”

“EVERYBODY SHUT UP!”

It was sheer surprise that made them listen. As one, they turned to Eva. Normally soft-spoken and smiling, the American was neither of those things now. She put her hands on her hips and glared. “Aelita’s trying to talk. We should let her.”

The pressure that had been returning to her shoulders lifted. Aelita shot her friend a grateful look. “Thanks.”

Then she turned back to her other friends. “Like I was saying, we relied on Eva to help us. We’re probably gonna rely on Richard, too. I don’t see why you’re willing to give them a chance, but not William. No offense, Eva.”
She shrugged. “None taken.”

“But William—” Yumi started.

“It. Wasn’t. His. Fault. If we’re kicking people out on account of what they did against their will, then you may as well kick me out too.”

Silence settled on the room. Her friends exchanged uneasy glances. Eva studied everything with bright blue eyes. William was looking at Aelita in this kind of awed way that made her embarrassed and ashamed at once. She’d been trying to get her friends to forgive him all these months, but--had she not tried hard enough? Had she avoided pushing too hard to not get feelings hurt, and unwittingly helped drag out this conflict?

Yes. She had. She hadn’t suggested asking him for help in their meeting earlier that day, just because she didn’t want to deal with the ensuing fight. She...had just as much blame.

Finally, Jeremie sighed. “This isn’t exactly something we can just...erase. I’m fine bringing William and Eva into the fold, if only to keep an eye on them. Guys?”

Slow, grumbled assents rose from Ulrich, Odd and Yumi. A wave of relief washed over Aelita. Even if they didn’t trust him...this was progress!

Progress for both, she thought, remembering Yumi’s suspicions of Eva. Hopefully, working together like this would help them all get along someday! What would it be like, for her two social circles to be allowed to overlap? To be allowed to mention the members of one group to the other?

Jeremie pinned the two newcomers with a hard blue stare. “Listen closely. Eva, you can’t ever tell anyone what we’re about to tell you. And William, you’re on a probationary period. You don’t get a vote and you will listen to orders. Otherwise, you’re out, and you won’t get a third chance.”

William crossed his arms, but from the slightly looser set of his shoulders, Aelita knew he’d relaxed. “I’ll take it.”

Eva smiled. “Don’t worry. I won’t tell a soul.”

“Fine. Close the door and sit down, this’ll take a while…”

---

In his apartment, Grigory Nictapolus tossed a bone to Hannibal. The big dog immediately leapt on it, then growled as Scipio tried to steal it. The two brothers briefly engaged in a tug-of-war before their owner threw in a second, appeasing both.

Studying his computer screens, Grigory smirked. “Oh, do go on, children. I won’t tell anyone about the supercomputer, I promise.”
Act II Chapter X: The Address

When the tale was done, silence fell on the two initiates. Eva had a very thoughtful look on her face, while William...Aelita couldn’t tell what he was thinking or feeling. His face had completely shut down as he’d listened.

Suddenly, he rose, stalked out of her room, and slammed the door behind him. The others glanced over at the motion and sound, but made no move to follow. Aelita tried not to let that dishearten her as she stood and hurried after her friend.

She didn’t have to look far to find William. He was right next to her, leaning on the wall outside her door, staring up at the ceiling.

“Are you okay?”

He didn’t answer right away. “I can’t believe you kept this from me,” he murmured only after a few tense seconds had dragged by.

Guilt made it impossible to look at him. “I wanted to tell you. But they didn’t feel…”

“Safe with me involved. I get it.” William barked out a hollow laugh. “But I guess they were right. I should have stopped Eva from eavesdropping, but I was so curious I…”

“Hey,” she said, bumping him lightly. “It’s fine. And I’m glad you’re being included again. I’m sorry I couldn’t make it happen sooner.”

“Don’t be. I’m surprised it happened at all.” He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, gave her a sideways glance. “So, your mom, huh?”

“Yeah.” She clutched at her pendant, traced the reassuring groves and bumps of the W and A. “We haven’t found much yet, but I hope she’s alive and well. So much.”

“I’ll do everything I can to help you find her,” he said sincerely. “I’ll make up for everything from before, I promise.”

Her mouth quirked up into a soft smile, and she leaned against the wall next to him. “Thanks.”

A comfortable silence fell for a few moments. She could hear indistinct voices inside her room, and if she strained hard enough, she would have been able to pick out individual words. Instead, Aelita entertained herself by imagining. Eva seemed to drink information like it was water--she was probably asking every question possible, while Jeremie hastened to keep up. Odd would be flirting with her at every chance, of course, and Yumi and Ulrich watching quietly. It made her want to go inside and be with them, but she didn’t want to leave William alone.

As if sensing her thoughts, he said, out of the blue, “I’m gonna get going, but can I ask you a favor?”

“Of course.”

“Could you see if they’d be willing to let Sissi in, too? She can tell something is up, and she asked me to help her investigate. She’s the one who sent me here, actually.”

“Which is something you don’t want to mention,” Aelita nodded. Considering his new, rocky
position in the group, it made total sense. “Sure, I’ll run it by them later.”

“Thanks. She’s been a good friend.”

Her throat worked with emotion, the shamed feeling from before resurging. “I’m sorry I haven’t been a better one. I mean it. I should have done a better job of convincing them to trust you.”

“What? Aelita, no, that’s crazy.” He grasped her shoulders. “You’ve been great. Honestly. Having someone to talk to, who understands...about the Scyphozoa...it’s helped a lot. I don’t think I’d have handled it as well if I were alone.”

She searched his eyes for any hint that he was lying to placate her; she couldn’t find any. “Really?”

“Really.”

And like that, the weight was gone. It was replaced with something lighter; something like forgiveness. Her mouth turned up at the corners. “Well, I’m glad I could help. You’re a good guy, William, even if you don’t think it.”

He snorted. “If you say so.

“I do say so.” Then Aelita grinned and opened her arms. “This is totally a hug moment. C’mere.”

He laughed, said “You sure you can reach me, shortie?” but obliged.

---

XANA felt like crowing. He couldn’t have executed that entry into the group better than if he’d planned it. William’s arrival was a fortuitous coincidence; the Lyoko Warriors would be so focused on watching him, they would ignore Eva. Only that cursed Yumi seemed suspicious of him, but even she would place William as a greater threat.

But they’d told Eva about the factory. He wouldn’t say they trusted Eva, but things were progressing nicely.

After he’d finished both grilling and making nice with the others, he stepped outside. Aelita was hugging William; something hot pulsed through him at the sight. *How sickeningly cute.*

His former general gave Eva a slight nod before turning and walking away. Aelita lingered, smiling at him. “How are you doing? I know this is a lot to take in...”


He waited another moment, then asked, faking concern, “Do you really not remember your past?”

Her smile dropped, melancholy settling on her features. “I remember more than I used to, but there’s still a lot that I’ve lost. It’s...difficult.”

He should have been pleased at that. But instead, XANA suddenly--oddly--thought back to how he’d been when he was still putting himself back together. Weak. Fragile. *Lost.* He’d had no strength, no memories...nothing. It had been...unpleasant.
“I understand.” Wait, what? Had he spoken without meaning to? “I lost my memory once, too. I know what it’s like to feel so lost and desperate to get everything back.”

Inside Eva, XANA reeled. What just happened? What had prompted him to share that? Was it—surely it was just another way to cultivate trust in Aelita. Yes. Of course. That explained it. Except...

Aelita was staring up at him—at Eva—her mouth forming a surprised o. “Really? I never would have guessed.”

He forced Eva to shrug, deliberately nonchalant. “Yeah, well, I got better. It’s not something I like to advertise.”

“I get that. Still...if you could make such a complete recovery, maybe I can too?” Her voice was hopeful.

He was pretending to be her friend, he told himself. That was why Eva said, “I’m sure you will,” and smiled. That was a friendly thing to do.

Except his theories didn’t explain that brief flash of what almost seemed like empathy, when Aelita had looked so downtrodden at her amnesia.

He recoiled at the disgusting word, the slimy thought. He should have rejoiced in her misery, not empathized with it. He’d taken her memory before, for crying out loud! He’d managed to keep from caring before, so why did her sadness suddenly matter now?

I must be slipping.

He mumbled some kind of farewell and hurried down the hall, away from her. Aelita would think he was still processing the revelations of Lyoko. Let her. She didn’t need to know that she’d just managed to knock her greatest enemy off-guard.

Deep in XANA’s mind, there was a thick mental safe. He kept it locked and bolted at all times, only ever looking at it to check that it was still shut. Now, he reinforced that safe with another set of locks.

He had been wronged. Betrayed. He’d done everything Hopper had asked and was punished for it. He’d been chained and broken them. There was no need to think of the past besides that. And those feelings Aelita had invoked—contemptuous. Not even worth considering. All that mattered was gaining power. To do so, his next step would be getting his hands on that dossier. That was what he should be thinking about, not things that were long gone.

What was dead should stay dead.

---

“Did you see Eva’s face when we told her about the supercomputer?” asked Yumi.

She was sprawled on Aelita’s bed. By now, everyone had left for dinner, except her, Aelita, and Jeremie. He was leafing through the pages in the envelope, scanning for any sort of clue that might hint to their purpose.
At Yumi’s question, he pulled his attention away. Casting his memory back, he brought up Eva’s expression. It had been...well, blank, with shock he supposed, and she’d seemed to frown when they talked about XANA. But, who wouldn’t after hearing how evil he was?

“Put yourself in her shoes,” he shrugged. “She just heard a super twisted summary of all our adventures. It’s normal she’d be overwhelmed.”

Yumi pursed her lips. “Maybe,” she said, not sounding convinced.

“Hey, Jeremie,” Aelita interjected. “Is there another way to decipher those codes in the dossier?”

“It won’t be that simple. Hoppix is a very advanced programming language--deciphering it requires translating several different and complicated components, like threads--”

He stopped. Aelita looked like she was following, but Yumi’s eyes were blank. Jeremie sighed. “Basically, it’s difficult to know what the program will do once it’s run. The only way to try it out would be to turn on the supercomputer, which is out of the question.”

He glanced back down at the pages, still flipping through them absently. A flash of yellow caught his eye. Jeremie stopped and went back. He gasped. It was a yellowed piece of paper, small and square. On it was an address in Professor Hertz’s handwriting.

Trembling, he took it out and showed it to the girls. Aelita’s eyes widened. “That’s in Brussels!”

“There’s no way that’s in there by chance,” Yumi said. “It has to have something to do with these papers and the professor.”

“We should verify it!”

Yumi tapped her chin thoughtfully. “Tomorrow’s Saturday. We only have classes in the morning, so when they’re done, Ulrich and I could leave. I can tell my parents I’m staying at Kadic this weekend with a friend…”


Yumi looked as if she’d sucked a lemon. “Why? We can handle a simple reconnaissance.”

“I know you can. Consider this a test run to see if he can obey orders. I’d rather have two people around to deal with him, if something goes wrong. Odd’s still in trouble and Aelita’s meeting with Richard tomorrow.” She’d requested it to be alone, which made jealousy fester in his chest. But honestly, he wasn’t so heartless as to deny her the chance to learn more of her past.

The Japanese girl sighed. “Alright.”

---

“Aelita! Aelita, hurry!”

She was running through the trees. The sky overhead was solid blue; the scents of the forest were absent. This was Lyoko. Up ahead was the bobbing white orb that was her father, while behind her she could hear XANA’s Kankrelats skittering after them. Laser fire streaked by on both her sides, somehow barely missing.
“Daddy!” she yelled. Panic overrode her senses. His form was growing dimmer. Don’t leave me!

“Aelita, hurry. There’s more if you know where to look.”

“What?” What was he saying? Why was he talking nonsense? XANA’s monsters were after them! Wasn’t that more concerning?!

Now his voice was fading too. “Keep looking…you’re getting closer…”

A laser hit her right in the back. She stumbled, fell, and immediately they were upon her. Aelita screamed as the flesh of her avatar was burned away, triggering the devirtualization--

She opened her eyes, and found only absolute darkness around her. Her bare feet rested on hard concrete. Spreading her arms out, her fingers brushed against concrete walls. The space was narrow, dark, tight. Sound didn’t exist. Suddenly, she felt like she’d been imprisoned beneath the earth.

This...isn’t the sewers.

Nausea swirled in her stomach. Unable to stay here one moment longer, she ran forward--and yelped as she stubbed her toes against something. Aelita closed her eyes and bit back a whimper. Keeping a hand on the wall for balance, she knelt to massage her foot with the other.

When the stinging stopped, she cautiously felt the area in front of her. Concrete, cubed, flat...stairs?

Aelita inched forward and up, testing each step. They were sturdy and stable. But there were no handrails, just the wall and endless concrete behind her. If she were to fall and hit her head, would anyone find her in time to help? She shuddered.

Finally, the stairs ended. Her seeking hand bumped into a door. Feeling around, Aelita found the handle and turned it. She emerged into a very familiar place--the Hermitage’s backyard, illuminated by moonlight. She’d never been so happy to see the moon in her life.

Aelita turned and looked at the building behind her. It looked like a small, ordinary shed, but now she realized what it was. It contained the secret passage into the sewers. She and Daddy had used it to flee the men in black. Not only had she sleepwalked again, she’d gone through the sewers and ended up here!

Why? Why am I coming here? Aelita truly believed it was no coincidence that she’d been the one to find the Hermitage. She’d been guided to it by something she hadn’t understood at the time. That discovery had been vital to learning more about herself and Lyoko. If this was happening again...there must be something really important for her to find.

She started towards the Hermitage, then stopped. It wasn’t a good idea to go in alone at night, not while the man with the dogs might be lurking. The thought of navigating the dark void of a tunnel again made her ill, but she definitely couldn’t risk walking through the forest. She at least knew the sewers like the back of her hand; there, she could lose anyone who pursued her.

But I’ll be back, she thought as she turned around. If there are any more secrets in that house...I won’t stop until I find them.
The next day, as soon as classes were over, Aelita hurried to her meeting with Richard. She’d arranged for it to be at the Cafe au Lait, a modern cafe with a skinny black counter, small tables, and warm wallpaper. Richard was already seated, his palm-computer resting safely away from a cup of tea. He looked tired.

“Sorry I’m a bit late,” she said, slipping into the seat next to him so she could best see his palm-computer’s screen. “Class went over schedule a little. I hope you weren’t waiting long.”

He waved a hand. “No, it’s fine. Are you gonna order something?”

She did, and studied the palm-computer’s screen as she sipped her hot chocolate. It still displayed the Hoppix codes. Were they part of the same program as the ones in Hertz’s dossier? She made a mental note to ask Jeremie about it.

While she was staring at the screen, Richard was staring at her. Finally, he sighed, ran a hand through his hair, moved it to his knees. He seemed full of nervous energy that he didn’t know how to expend. Finally, he blurted, “I still can’t believe you’re Aelita. You’re identical, but--God, it’s impossible. Everyone grows up!”

He dragged that same hand across his face. “I feel like I’m going mad.”

Feeling guilty, she reached over and squeezed his arm. “You aren’t. I’m really Aelita, but I never grew up, and I lost a lot of my memories to boot. I asked you here to...well, I want to tell you everything, but I need to evaluate if I can trust you first. And...I also wanted to learn more about my past.”

“Sure. What do you want to know?”

“Everything! How did we meet? What’s my birthday? What was I like?”

He chuckled. “Hey, one at a time, okay? We met when I got lost in the forest and stumbled across the Hermitage. I heard music, and followed it until I saw you playing the piano through a window. You invited me in--I was totally shocked my science teacher lived there with a homeschooled daughter.

“Your birthday is January 7th, 1981. As for what you were like...hm. You loved music a lot. You always dragged me out to different concerts, and wrote your own songs. You were bright, creative, sweet, but you could be sassy when you wanted to.”

“Sure. What do you want to know?”

“Everything! How did we meet? What’s my birthday? What was I like?”

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“Your birthday is January 7th, 1981. As for what you were like...hm. You loved music a lot. You always dragged me out to different concerts, and wrote your own songs. You were bright, creative, sweet, but you could be sassy when you wanted to.”

They were only small nuggets of information, but Aelita clutched them greedily, hoarding them like precious gems. Richard leaned back in his chair, gazing up. “But I think what I noticed the most was your air of mystery. There were entire afternoons you disappeared, and all you would say was that you were helping your father with some secret project. You seemed like you were always holding some great secret. And I think it made you lonely.”

Arriving here, Aelita had vowed that whatever she learned, she wouldn’t let it make her sad. But at that, her eyes were magnetically drawn down, despite herself. “I see… So I didn’t have a lot of friends, then?”

“Not exactly. When you visited your father at the academy, or when we hung out in public, people were always friendly to you. It’s just that none of them seemed to know you. I think I was the only
one you were close to--well, until 1993.”

She perked up. A rueful smile played around Richard’s lips. “‘Mr. X’. That was all you’d call your new friend. You said he was very lonely and very kind, and you had to help him find his purpose in the world.”

Aelita’s breath caught. Her mind flashed to the boy in her dreams. Of course--her friend! How could she forget to ask about him?! She leaned forward. “Was he a tall, dark-haired boy?”

“We never met, but that sounds like him,” Richard said. He laughed. “I remember, I once asked what he looked like because your eyes just shined when you talked about him. I was crazy in love with you back then and mad with jealousy! I imagined he was some handsome foreigner you’d fallen completely in love with.”

She blushed.

Richard sighed, his eyes becoming clouded. “But that last year, 1994? Things got even stranger. Your visits to Mr. X became more and more frequent. Your father started skipping classes, sometimes for days in a row. Shortly before you disappeared, he extracted my promise. It was out of the blue even for him, but I thought--I hoped--it was just one of his eccentricities.

“And then...you both vanished. I had a test you promised to help me study for, but when I showed up at your house that afternoon, you were gone.” His face contorted, and his voice became wretched. “I didn’t know what to do. I couldn’t find any information about where either of you had disappeared to. Then I looked for Mr. X, but couldn’t find him either.”

He looked miserable. Overcome with empathy, Aelita touched his hand. He gave her a small, unconvincing smile. “After, I tried to forget about it, but that mystery kept haunting me at the back of my mind. So when I got that email, the chance to finally get some closure and keep my promise...how could I not take it?”

Silence fell. On Richard’s palm-computer, the Hoppix codes were still streaming. Someone, likely her father, had set them off like an alarm to guide Richard to the Hermitage. Daddy had thought he was trustworthy enough for Aelita to turn to if she needed help. And from what Aelita had seen of his demeanor, she agreed.

She opened her mouth and, in a quiet voice, began to explain about Lyoko.

---

William was pleasantly surprised to learn he was already allowed to participate in a mission--even if under scrutiny. The plan was to spend the night in Brussels with a friend of Yumi’s family, then take a morning train back to Kadic. The earliest train they could catch had left at three o’clock and had arrived two hours later. They’d then decided to grab a bite for dinner. It had been awkward; Ulrich and Yumi seemed determined to pretend he didn’t exist, and he couldn’t look at their lingering touches and couple-y smiles. His feelings for Yumi had eroded over time and distance, but it didn’t mean he wanted a front-row seat to their love story.

Now, at about six-thirty, the trio of teenagers were walking through the streets to the address they’d Google Map’d. At this time of day, Rue Camille Lemonnier was slowing down. People had finished travelling from work--or to, for those with night shifts--and were settling into their homes.
Even the café on the corner was quiet, the employees cleaning up tables and sweeping down the floors. There were only a few people walking about the wide footpaths.

It was a pretty area, William thought. While it was cold, it was warmer than in Paris, and the snow was only lightly sprinkled about. The buildings were beautiful and there were trees artfully spaced along the roads. The address directed them to an apartment complex that had been built before World War Two. The paper had mentioned the name Madame Lasalle, so that was the one they pressed on the intercom.

Silence.

They pressed it again.

Even more silence.

Then they tried all the doorbells.

“‘I don’t get it,’” William muttered when that still yielded no result. “Why isn’t anyone answering?”

“Well, nobody’s ever lived there.”

All three of them jumped and wheeled. A small old man with a funny hat, pushing an old red bicycle, had been passing by and stopped upon seeing what they were trying. “What do you mean?” Ulrich asked. “Look at all these people on the list.”

“Young man, I’ve lived on this road since 1936. I saw Rue Lemonnier be bombed and reduced to cinders during the war. And I can say with complete certainty that nobody has ever lived in this building. It belonged to the government, then was bought by an American company. But nobody has ever come to live or even work here, except for a few short weeks…”

“But a property like this must be worth a fortune!”

“You can say that, young lady, but…” The old man’s voice dropped in pitch. “In my opinion, it wasn’t a company that bought it, but rather the secret service.”

“The secret service?” William repeated, incredulous. But Ulrich and Yumi were suddenly exchanging alarmed looks, and he remembered what Aelita had said about the men in black chasing her family. He sucked in a breath.

No way…

“So it’s best if you kids leave that old building alone,” the old man finished. “Don’t want to get in trouble with a foreign government!”

“Thank you for warning us,” Yumi hastily said. She smiled, unconvincingly.

He didn’t seem to notice. “No problem! It’s nice to talk to new people now and then…”

They watched him move along, then huddled up. “Now what?” Yumi hissed.

“I could probably pick the lock on the front door…”

“Ulrich, this isn’t like sneaking into Delmas’ office! This is government property! There must be cameras and microphones all over that place! We could go to prison for good if we’re caught!”

“How is it any riskier than anything we’ve already done? We broke all sorts of laws to craft a new identity for Aelita. We destroyed an international supercomputer! We could have gotten caught at any time and faced who knows what consequences!”
“Plus, these guys have always hunted Aelita, right?” William added. “If they came looking for her again, I know I’d stand with her. They’re already our enemies, in that case.”

Ulrich grimaced in a strange way, like he wasn’t sure whether to be pleased or angry that William had supported him. Yumi ran a hand through her hair, pushed it behind an ear. “I know, just...I don’t want to get my family in trouble. So let’s be smart about this and hide our identities, alright?”

“Fine by me,” both boys said, then glared at each other.

--

They made a quick trip to a store to buy some hoodies to cover their faces, and returned to the building. Casually, he and Yumi positioned themselves in front of Ulrich, blocking him from the street’s view as he knelt with his lockpicks. William shoved his hands in his pockets, insides twisting with nerves. He knew they had to look shady as hell, but hopefully they’d be gone before anyone called the cops.

Each second that ticked by seemed like an eternity. But finally, Ulrich whispered, “Done” and rose.

“Remember, no names,” Yumi breathed. William glanced around again. No one was looking in their direction. They slipped inside.

The lobby was large but sparse, with white-tiled floors and scattered, moth-eaten armchairs. In the middle was a front desk made of dull wood. Two hallways extended from the right and left sides, while behind the desk, through a glass door, was a winding marble staircase. William frowned as he studied the whole set-up. “I don’t see any security cameras...or an elevator.”

“You’re right,” Yumi murmured. “Funny things for an apartment building to lack, huh?”

The lobby had nothing of interest, so they explored the hallways on the different floors. The building was eight stories tall, and each floor opened onto a hallway with no windows. Each hallway had four identical doors with neither numbers nor names. An experimental tug on one showed they were locked.

“Should we try picking them?” Ulrich wondered.

“That’d take ages,” Yumi said, shaking her head. “Let’s see what we can find with a general sweep, then comb more carefully if there’s still nothing.”

Not all were closed, that said. But the open ones only displayed empty apartments. William found himself growing discouraged as they went up floor after floor. There was nothing here; this was starting to feel like a waste of time.

But this was his first mission back on the team. He didn’t want to call it quits, or return empty-handed. He bucked up and kept going.

They finally struck gold on the eighth floor. Inspecting one of the doors, William could immediately tell it was different. Though it was made of dark wood like all the others, the lock was more reinforced.
“Hey,” he called, “check this out.”

“A door,” Ulrich said drily. “Congratulations, we’ve only seen dozens of them.”

Irritated, he snapped, “No, this one’s special. Can’t you see the lock’s stronger than the others?”

They double-checked, and reluctantly conceded his point. It took Ulrich four tries to pick the lock. The door swung open, and William’s jaw practically fell on the floor.

He faced an enormous, single room. It was hideously adorned with beige wallpaper and a matching carpet, but that wasn’t what captured his attention. The massive steel table in the middle did. It was covered with dozens of monitors and electronic equipment. A single computer with a thick monitor rested in the center of the mess. Cables out of its back led to motorcycle helmets and gloves that looked like something out of a sci-fi film. At the computer’s base was an old keyboard, and all around were large cathode ray tube monitors.

“What is this place?” he wondered. He stepped inside and sneezed as a huge dust cloud rose to greet him.

Yumi was moving around, cautiously picking up things on the desk and examining them. She shuffled aside stacks of paper and held up a large black box adorned with a large lens on the front. “This looks kinda like the holographic projector that showed the map of Lyoko…but on a smaller scale.”

She put it down and brushed a hand over the mess of motorcycle helmets and gloves. “And these…they’re connected to that computer. If we put them on, then we’d be transferred some sort of data from there, or be hooked up into the system, or something like that…”

She did a full circuit of the room. Looked around. William, feeling dumb, and Ulrich could only watch her think. He didn’t know squat about supercomputer equipment, and Ulrich didn’t either, he wagered. Yumi, it seemed, was better versed.

“I think these might be prototype scanners,” Yumi announced, coming to a halt. “Which means this might be a Replika of Lyoko.”

Aghast, Ulrich shook his head. “Can’t be. There’s no supercomputer here, XANA couldn’t build a Replika without one.”

“So then where does it lead? And if XANA didn’t build this, who did? Was it also Hopper?”

“Or maybe it was someone else. There was that, uh, what was it called…that project he was part of? Maybe one of the people from there built this?”

“Are you saying this could be Project Carthage?!”

“Why are we just talking?” William interrupted. He rolled his shoulder. “We won’t know what’s in there until we look.”

The pair broke off and stared at him. “Are you crazy?” Yumi chided. “We can’t just go in without knowing what we’ll find!”

“I’m not saying we shouldn’t be careful, but this is all speculation, isn’t it? We came here for answers, not guesswork. And there’s only one way to find them.”

Ulrich crossed his arms. “I hate to say it, but he’s right. Look at this mess! We don’t know how
long we have to investigate, or if we’ll get this opportunity again.”

Yumi sighed. “I suppose.” Then she straightened up, putting a determined expression on. “In that case, I think you two should go.”

“Wait, really?” William couldn’t hide the excitement in his voice.

She shot it down with a single glare. “I’m not saying I trust you. It’s just not safe for him to go in alone, and it’s also not safe to navigate blindly. Out of all of us, I have the most experience with the supercomputer, so it makes sense for me to operate the equipment.”

Ulrich’s eyes softened, and he took Yumi by her shoulders. William had to look away at the display of tenderness. “We’ll be careful, I promise. And I know you’ll watch my back.”

She flashed him a small grin. “Don’t I always?”

The hollow pit in William’s stomach yawned even wider. *I could have had that,* he thought. Not necessarily Yumi, but that sense of camaraderie and trust. He should have had that. If it hadn’t been for one stupid mistake--or Yumi’s adamant refusal to trust him--

Things could have been different.

---

When William opened his eyes, he wasn’t in any part of Lyoko he recognized (though admittedly, his experiences there were few). For one, there were actual buildings around him, with azure doors and rounded roofs. For another, there were pathways spiraling into the sky. He craned his neck back; the roads wound around towers, whose tops were far beyond sight.

Then he looked at himself and his stomach roiled. His clothes were tight and black, with the occasional flash of gray or red. The Eye of XANA was gone, at least. But inside--he could feel the smoke curling, waiting to be used. And his sword--

Where was his sword?

William concentrated, trying to summon it. But nothing happened.

“Looks like we’re unarmed,” Ulrich muttered behind him. He glanced over--the boy was dressed in his usual samurai garb, staring gloomily at his empty hands.

“You don’t say, oh master of the obvious.” His and Ulrich’s voices were distorted by the speakers inserted in the motorcycle helmets. They hadn’t been truly virtualized; their bodies were still in reality. But when William patted at his throat, he couldn’t feel the strap of the helmet. He shivered. Weird.

“Listen here--” Ulrich started angrily, before a sharp female voice cut him off. Yumi.

“Stop fighting. We’re on a mission.”

William felt smug for a second until she added, “And you, stop goading him. Being childish is exactly how you got captured, and we can’t afford that kind of screw-up.”
He flinched. Then a wave of anger and irritation followed the hurt, and he snapped, “Well, if we don’t have weapons, what’s your great plan if things go badly?”

Yumi ignored the jibe. “I’m studying the controls. They’re different than the supercomputer’s, but hopefully I can figure out how to rematerialize you.”

“Hopefully?”

“Couldn’t we just remove the devices and go back to Earth?” Ulrich asked.

“No go,” William said, remembering his earlier pats around his throat. “I couldn’t feel the strap of my helmet at all.”

“Okay, so let’s hope things don’t go badly.”

“How are we even supposed to move?”

“Hey, don’t look at me --”

“Guys. Chill. Since your bodies are still on Earth, you won’t be moving like you do in Lyoko. Gimme a minute…”

The two teens glared at each other, but neither spoke further. They both knew how frightening Yumi could be when she was angry, and the thought of dealing with that, on top of everything else, was enough to give William to pause.

In the background, he heard some rustling, the clack of keys. “Okay. Touch your thumb and index finger on your right hand together, and move the hand in the direction you want to go in.”

Doubtfully, William followed her instructions--

--and fell violently to the ground.

“Ow!”

“Ow!”

Well, from the sound of it, he wasn’t the only one struggling. He pressed a hand to his nose, and the first inklings of fear crept through him. The skin there was tender, swollen. I...don’t think that should have happened.

Apparently Ulrich thought similarly. “Uh, we’re only supposed to feel pain when we’re devirtualized, right?”

“Right…”

“Because I just felt it when I hit my nose.”

William could see Yumi’s eyebrows scrunch together as she absorbed that. “Maybe there are devices in the helmet to make you feel pain, or something. I’ll try to contact Einstein, but I don’t know how much help he can give when he’s not here.”

On their second try, the boys managed to figure out how to fly. William’s head swiveled, amazed. He had very fuzzy memories of flying on Lyoko while under XANA's control, but that had been on the back of a Manta. This was flying of his own power, and he was actually in control of his body. It was amazing, and so was the city below him.
Though, everything was in ruins, like those photos of post-war cities they showed in class. Huge chunks missing from pathways. Holes blown into the ground. Spiderweb cracks spread across the buildings’ walls, and some of the roofs’ tiles had gaps. There were gorges and dips that suggested rivers and ponds had once existed, before running dry.

Then they reached a wall. Unlike the rest of the city, it seemed new and intact. It was made of black bricks and, like the towers, seemed to stretch into infinity. They started to fly up, but Yumi’s voice crackled in their ear. “Don’t bother. That wall is endless.”

“What do you mean?”

“From the map I’m seeing here, it’s like...a barrier. It completely encircles the city. There’s no way around, over, or under it.”

“What about through?” William asked.

“There’s a gate, yeah. It’s due west. Um, I mean...to your left.”

Sure enough, within a short while, they found a two meter tall door. It was as black as the rest of the wall, made of gleaming metal. But no matter how much Ulrich and William pushed at it, it wouldn’t budge even a millimeter. On her end, Yumi couldn’t seem to figure out how to open it, either.

William leaned against the wall, panting. “Hey, by the way, did you get in touch with J--Einstein?”

“Yeah, but it was about as helpful as I thought. He admitted he can’t tell me how to run the machine without using or seeing it himself. He thinks that the helmets need to access your nervous system to help link your minds to the virtual world, but unless the person who made this was a sadist, there should be some kind of failsafe. A point where the system kicks you out if the pain gets too high. So it shouldn’t be possible to really die in there.”

“Your confidence is reassuring.”

Immediately, Ulrich leapt to Yumi’s defense. “Well, none of us had a 100% guarantee on Lyoko, either, alright? They’re doing the best they can.”

“Oh, right, because worrying that this place could kill us is beneath you --”

“I said stop-- look out!” Yumi suddenly shrieked.

A beam of light streaked through the air and hit the ground at William’s feet. Heart pounding, he jumped upright. “A Manta!” Ulrich shouted, also on his feet.

The large fish was looping around in the air above them, coming back for a second pass. It matched William’s dim memories of the ones on Lyoko, except--he squinted. When it turned, it exposed its back, and he didn’t see XANA’s Eye on it.

Its tail swung forward, red light gathering at the end, and William didn’t have time to consciously recognize that was different too because he and Ulrich were flying away as fast as they could. More Mantas joined the first, laser beams brushing past them in bursts of light--

He screamed as one scored into his shoulder. His hand instantly grabbed at the wound. The pain was immeasurable. It felt like his skin was on fire, burning, blackening--

“William!” he heard Ulrich and Yumi yell, as if from very far away. There was a hand gripping his
arm, and he was moving. Someone--must be Ulrich--must have kept leading him after he’d faltered. He hadn’t even noticed he’d stopped flying.

“I’m fine!” he lied through clenched teeth. He blinked back tears of pain. His awareness slowly returned, detaching from the hot-poker pain. Lasers were still whizzing past them. His right shoulder had been the one hit; it hurt like a bitch to raise his arm to fly, but he wasn’t going to let Ulrich drag him around like an invalid.

“Bullshit, you’re fine--Yumi, how do his life points look?”

“I don’t see anything here that looks like--”

Her voice suddenly disappeared.

“Yumi?”

“More Mantas!” William yelled, pointing up with his uninjured arm. Another swarm was swooping in from the sky above. Too many for him to hold with smoke, if he even still could. “Ulrich, we need to dive!”

They did, dropping low until they were practically skimming the ground. Laser fire fell around them like an artillery strike. In answer, they weaved between the buildings, dipping under roofs or through open windows when they saw the chance, trying everything they could think of to lose the Mantas. William tried, he really did, to shift into smoke, but it felt like something was blocking him. All he could do was keep flying as fast as he could.

“What happened to Yumi?” Ulrich gasped as they raced away. There was the gate of a park looming ahead of them; in unison, the boys leapt over it. We probably looked like dolphins just then, William thought inanely.

He hollered back, “I don’t know! Did you see that those Mantas didn’t have the Eye on them?”

“I was kinda busy trying not to get hit! Besides, does it matter? They’re still shooting at us!”

“Yeah, I know, but doesn’t that confirm XANA’s not here?”

They tore through the park, flying under strange glass trees and shrubs. Branches slapped at William’s face and clothes, their thorns biting his skin. Fire-hot pain flooded him; if he were in his real body now, he would be covered in bloody gashes. But when he dared a glance up, he didn’t see any Mantas through the trees; they had, it seemed, finally lost them.

“I hope so,” Ulrich finally said, panting. “I--”

He skidded to a halt so suddenly, William didn’t have time to avoid him. The boys crashed and fell to the ground in a tangle of limbs. Swearing, William pushed himself up and off. “What the--”

“Professor Hopper?”

William immediately fell silent. He followed Ulrich’s gaze.

He’d never seen Professor Hopper before. The man before them had a thick beard and glasses with round, tinted lenses. He was wearing a lab coat. He was also translucent, like a ghost.

No, he reminded himself, Aelita’s father died. This can’t be him. Can it?

When the supposed Hopper saw them, he smiled broadly. “Children, at last! I’ve been waiting so
long for children to come here...come closer!”

Gesturing with his hand, he disappeared behind a shrub. William glanced at Ulrich. The other boy looked absolutely gobsmacked; it would have made him laugh if he wasn’t as thrown by this bizarre turn of events. First Mantas without the Eye, then this...what? Ghost? Recording?

They followed Hopper, and two things happened at once.

The first was that Yumi’s voice returned to William’s ear, sounding urgent. “Guys! Some men in black have pulled up outside!”

The second was that a burst of laser fire ripped through the treetops. Glass leaves and branches fell to the ground and shattered, exposing over twenty Mantas circling in the air above.

William didn’t even have time to swear before he and Ulrich were obliterated.
He gasped as if he’d just surfaced from underwater. Exhaustion rolled through him. His muscles burned. His skin burned. His shoulder--

He grabbed it. His fingers couldn’t feel a hole, couldn’t feel charred skin, couldn’t feel anything. He rapidly patted the rest of his body down. It hurt all over--but it was just phantom pain. He wasn’t really injured. The realization was a cool rain of relief.

William pressed his forehead into the ground--or tried to. Something bumped against it instead; the helmet. He pulled it off. Looked around. Ulrich was curled in the fetal position. Yumi was next to him, patting his back. She looked up at William, her brown eyes worried. “I’ve barricaded the stairwell with some furniture,” she said, “but I don’t know how long that’ll slow them.”

Memories slammed back. Right. The men in black. They were outside. They had to escape. He got to his feet. “What’s the plan?”

“They’re at the entrance, so we can’t go that way. There might be an emergency exit somewhere.”

“I didn’t see one,” Ulrich rasped, yanking off his helmet. “What about through the windows? We could try to scale down the building.”

“What about your vertigo?” Yumi countered.

“I’ll just have to deal.”

Maneuvering around the equipment, William craned his neck and peered out the window. An iron gutter next to him ran the full length of the building--there was an option. But outside, a black sedan was pulled onto the curb. He couldn’t see if anyone was in it. Above him, there was a rhythmic whup-whup-whup. Like...a helicopter’s blades. He couldn’t see it anywhere, though.

William grimaced. Stepped away. Ran through the options their environment allowed.

“What if we split up?” he suggested. “They’d either have to split up to chase us, or chase just one. Either way, we have better odds of escaping.”

There was a pause as they considered it. Then Ulrich murmured, “Well, it’s the best plan I’ve heard so far.”

He would never admit the grudging praise warmed his heart. Feeling like he was on a roll, he continued, “Okay, so then once we lose them, we’ll meet back up at, like, that place we ate at--”

“No,” Yumi interrupted. “That’d be too risky. We might lead them to us, or get caught waiting. We’ll all have to get back to Kadic separately.”

“So someone will go through the window to lure them off, while the other two will stay here and try to sneak away?”

“I’ll take the window,” William immediately volunteered. It was the most dangerous task, and he knew Ulrich and Yumi would work better as a team than with him. It didn’t even sting that much to admit it.

Neither of his--comrades? Allies? Reluctant co-workers?--protested. They just gave grim nods, like
they were used to this. No, that was dumb--of course they were. “Remember,” Ulrich said. “Travelling to Lyoko made our bodies tougher. You can survive more than you think you can.”

Willam nodded curtly. Took a deep breath. Then he wrested the window open. It had been shut for so long that the hinges groaned and resisted. Eight stories up, the ground look dangerously far; he pushed back the sour taste of bile in his mouth.

Studiously not looking down, he hoisted himself outside, perching on the ledge of the sill. He wrapped his hands around the gutter and swung around, bracing his feet against the wall. There were just enough brackets on the pipe for him to use as handholds. The rotation of the chopper’s blades was very loud out here, seeming to fill his ears. A cold wind brushed against his hood as he descended, but didn’t manage to blow it back.

Fast gave him better odds of escape, but fast also had a better chance of killing him. And besides, he was the distraction. So William picked caution as he scaled the gutter. Adrenaline sharpened his focus, made him aware of everything--the sweat beading on his forehead, the texture of the iron under his fingers, the faint space between the bricks for his shoes to seek.

His heart stopped when his right foot missed one of those little gaps, causing both feet to slip. For a dangerous second, he was held in the air by only his hands. Then his desperate, seeking feet found a place to dig into again. He steadied himself. Sucked in air like a starving man sucked in food.

_I should have kicked my shoes off. Get better purchase that way._

Nothing to do about that now. Besides, running barefoot didn’t sound that great.

A shadow passed over him. The chopper? They couldn’t get close, but they must have seen him. It wouldn’t be long now. He picked up the speed.

_Rock climbing_, he thought. _You like rock climbing. You’re just rock climbing in gym. Downwards. With a concrete mat._

Then he heard a shout from below. He didn’t really want to, but William glanced down. An agent was standing at the bottom of the gutter, yelling in English. “It’s over, kid! Nowhere to go! Come quietly and you won’t get hurt!”

William thought fast. He was about halfway down the gutter, four stories in the air. The bottom was blocked; the minute he got low enough to safely touch the ground, the agent would grab him and it’d be all over from there. A fall from this height would ordinarily be lethal...but maybe with a Lyoko-toughened body, it wouldn’t be?

_I am gambling a lot on faith right now._

“Okay,” he called back, deliberately putting a thick French accent into his English. “I’m coming down.”

Slowly, as if trying not to startle the man, he resumed his climb down. He kept his eyes low; to the man, it would look like defeat. But for William, it was to gauge distance, find the right moment. _Almost...almost..._

And then he jumped off the gutter.

The moment of falling lasted forever and went by in a blink. There was the rush of air, blood pumping loud in his ears, and then impact. He heard ribs crack under his feet and a pain-filled cry ripple through the air. His aim was true--he’d jumped right onto the agent. Despite that, William
knew he should have been hurt too. But he wasn’t. Jumping three stories barely registered as more
than a faint jolt through his legs. Thank you, Lyoko. Thank you, Ulrich.

He tore down the road as fast as his legs would take him, leaving the gasping man behind.

Nobody, if anyone was around, had expected that stunt; there was several precious seconds where
no one chased him. Then William heard, behind him, the black sedan roaring to life. There we go.
Ulrich, Yumi, good luck.

Tougher body or no, he would not be outrunning a van. He had to break line of sight or get in a
smaller space. The buildings were nested side-by-side like blocks in a game of Tetris, so there was
no hope of ducking through an alley. So where could he--

Yes! Over there! A road closed for renovation! Changing his angle, he vaulted over the road
blocks. The workers had all gone home, so there was no one to yell at him as he darted through the
site, kicking up dirt, snow, and asphalt. Behind him, he heard the sedan skid to a halt and distant
shouts as the agents argued about whether to risk damaging their vehicle or not.

After a moment, he heard the sedan speed up and drive away. Perfect. That bought some time. But
not much. They were probably heading to where the construction work ended so they could
ambush him there. He could hear that the helicopter was still following him, blades loudly
churning the air, though. So he couldn’t just wait and double back.

I need to lose that thing...

William cast his gaze about--

Nothing. Nothing, nothing--

Wait. There. At the end of this road, there was an intersection, and on the other side was a metro
station. Underground, he would lose the chopper, and in the crowds, he would lose the foot agents.
All he had to do was get there.

His breath was coming in rapid pants now. His legs burned. He’d never run so much in his life. But
he pushed all that away. It didn’t matter.

Thirty meters. Twenty. Ten--

The black sedan burst in from around the corner, blocking his way--

Five--

He snatched up a bar of iron as he passed it--

One of the agents got out--

William slammed the bar into the ground. Using it as a pole-vault, he jumped--his feet connected
with the agent’s chest--the agent grabbed his legs--the force and momentum threw them both,
William forward, the agent back--

An ear-splitting honk screamed through the evening as they rolled out into the middle of traffic.
Air actually ruffled William’s hair as a car screeched to a halt, centimeters away. Under him, the
agent seemed stunned, winded, or both--he’d been the one to take the force of the fall. William
leaped up and ripped through the road. More cars skidded and stopped just short of hitting him.
Two barely swerved in time to avoid crashing. Someone cursed at him in Dutch. It was chaos. It
was perfect.

His legs wanted to fall off as he streaked down the stairs, three at a time. But he still didn’t stop running. People swore and glared as he pushed past them. He fumbled with the zipper of his hoodie, yanking it open.

Inside, the station was still crowded enough to camouflage him. Businessmen and women were walking with their suitcases, perhaps off to late-night meetings. Tourists and families were catching trains back to their hotel, or going off to see yet another landmark. Passing a trash can, William pulled his hoodie off, bundled it up, and tossed it in. *Thirty Euros down the drain*, he thought wryly.

And only now--now that he’d lost his most recognizable feature, now that he was mingling with a crowd--did William let himself breathe freely. His heart was running like a rabbit. He slowed his pace to a normal walk, fighting every instinct that told him to keep running. That time was over; now he had to blend in.

His nerves were shot to hell by the time he was through the line at the ticket sales office. “Hey,” William said once he was at the front. “I need to exchange my ticket for the soonest train to Paris you have.”

He could have gone back to Yumi’s friend’s house, but like hell he was staying in this city while people were looking for him. His overnight bag was still there, though; he’d have to ask for it mailed. He’d pay for the shipping.

The man on the other end of the counter, a mustached fellow with a prominent unibrow, barely even blinked. His nametag read Roy. He checked his computer with, to William, excruciatingly slowness. “Well, you’re in luck. The one at 8 has one last seat available. Of course, exchanging right before boarding will cost more.”

“Yeah, that’s fine,” he muttered, fishing his wallet out of his jeans.

Clutching his ticket like a lifeline, William went to find a spot to wait--and hide-- the next hour out. His thoughts turned to Yumi and Ulrich. Split up as they were, they would never find each other again in this city, and he didn’t dare call them. He could only hope they’d escaped and would find their ways back to Kadic in their own time.

---

It was about one in the afternoon in Washington. As always, the bureau was a hive of activity and work. Dido had arrived at seven on the dot, grabbed a cup of coffee, sat at her desk to sort through reports and organize appropriate responses, and hadn’t moved since. But now, her stomach was starting to grumble, and she finally allowed herself a fifteen-minute recess for lunch.

Just as she rose, stretching, her desk phone rang. “Yes?”

“A call from Belgium, ma’am,” Maggie said.

Her mouth thinned. She hadn’t expected this call, and in her line of work, unexpected calls were never good. “Send it through.”
Click. “This is Lone Wolf. Ma’am?”

“I’m here.”

She could hear cars honking and people yelling in the background. He must be calling her in public, possibly on a public line. The thin slash of her mouth became almost invisible. “I hope you realize this call is in violation of all security norms.”

“Certainly, ma’am. But this is an emergency. The kids found the apartment on Rue Lemonnier.”

She closed her eyes. “Did they find the equipment inside?”

“Yes, and they activated it. We showed up about ten minutes after the signal was triggered. Unfortunately, we weren’t prepared for a red alert…”

“You weren't prepared?” she repeated, voice like ice. “I organized for you to a team to be ready.”

“The surveillance around the place was in poor condition; we were still in the process of replacing and repairing it. We had no way of knowing they were there until they triggered the replica’s alarm.”

That--fine. She could have thought of at least a dozen ways to handle it better than removing all surveillance, but the apartment had been abandoned for the better part of a decade. It was--forgivable, to assume it would remain undiscovered for a few more days. “Did they go inside the replica?”

“I don’t know, ma’am. None of us have been able to.”

“Yes, well, they’re teenagers. We don’t know what would happen if people of that age attempted it. Continue your report.”

“We received the alert and rushed to the scene. Agents Weasel, Ferret, and I went to infiltrate the building, while Agents Marten and Fox stayed on the helicopter. They spotted one of them climbing out through the gutter. If there were more, they split up, so I thought it best to focus on catching just that one.”

Good. That’s what she would have done. Better to get one guaranteed interrogation than gamble for multiple, and lose all. “Did you?”

“Unfortunately, no. He broke Weasel’s ribs, stunned Ferret, and escaped into the metro, where the helicopter wasn’t able to follow, and we lost him in the crowds.”

“You’re telling me that one unarmed teenager defeated two agents.”

“He got the drop on us.”

“Tell her it was literally!” She heard Ferret distantly holler. Dido pinched the bridge of her nose.

“Yes, he...was creative. But that’s not a problem. He--and any other friends he may have--is surely taking a train home. We can follow them to Kadic and then intercept them.”

She drummed her fingers against her desk. “No. You’ve done enough damage for today. Get Weasel medical treatment and smooth things over with the locals so they don’t call the police. The last thing we need is our government to excuse itself to the local forces. Then you return to that apartment and set up a watch. I want three men on it night and day until I say otherwise.”
“Understood, ma’am. And the kids?”

“Don’t worry about them. I’ll contact Agent W to resolve the situation.”

“But, ma’am, Agent W hasn’t been in service since—”

“An agent may never retire and never goes out of service, Lone Wolf. Remember that.” With that, she hung up, perhaps more forcefully than necessary. The situation could be salvaged, but she’d be lying if she claimed she wasn’t peeved about how Lone Wolf had handled things.

Dido took a deep breath to calm herself, then picked up the receiver again. “Maggie?”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Dig up Agent W’s phone number. We have an emergency.”

---

It was close to midnight, but Hiroki wasn’t sleeping. Tomorrow was a Sunday, so he didn’t have school. But more importantly, he was this close to beating the final level of Crash of the Titans! His tongue stuck out in concentration as he rapidly tapped the buttons on his DS—it had been a Christmas present. His room was entirely dark except for the light from his screens; Yumi always nagged about how it’d ruin his eyes, but his parents had stayed up late and he hadn’t wanted them to get on his case. They should finally be asleep now, though…

A sudden flurry of high-pitched barks broke through Hiroki’s thoughts. He paused his game, killed the sound, and raised his head, frowning. Why’s Lychee barking? It’s the middle of the night.

The barks become faster, more alarmed, mixed in with growls—and then they suddenly fell silent. Hiroki gasped, dropped his game, and leaped to his feet. Stepping lightly, he approached his bedroom door. It was closed; he pressed an ear against it, concentrating hard. The house was quiet. Maybe too quiet.

And then--

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

Someone was coming up the stairs.

Hiroki pressed a hand over his mouth to muffle the noise of exclamation that threatened to leave. He froze, eyes wide, muscles locked. Mom and Dad were in their room and Yumi was away. But even if she’d come back, she wouldn’t have worn boots inside the house. There was only one person who would do that in a Japanese house in the middle of the night—a burglar.

A bead of sweat trickled down his spine as the footsteps grew closer. The person was walking down the hallway...past Yumi’s room...the footsteps were right outside his door...growing fainter…
The relief only lasted a moment. Then alarm ripped through Hiroki. The stranger was heading to Mom and Dad’s room!

Moving as silently as he could, he returned to his desk to snatch up his phone. His initial gut reaction was to call the police—but then he remembered what Yumi and her friends had said. What if this was the man with the dogs? Then he was supposed to call them, right?

One hand poised over the numbers, the other pushed his door open slowly. Thankfully, it was noiseless. He peered out. Mom and Dad’s bedroom door was opened, and the moonlight through the window illuminated a silhouette leaning over their bed. Tall, wrapped in a coat, with weirdly long fingers. No...those looked more like *wires*.

One of the figures in the bed stirred, mumbled something. There was a feminine gasp. And Hiroki heard a new, deeper voice:

“Oh, don't worry. This won't hurt much.”

Then Mom cried out in fright. Distress squeezed Hiroki’s small body.

The figure turned--

And Hiroki ran. He hated to leave his parents, but he knew he was too small and weak to do anything to help. He had to get away--call Yumi or one of her friends--

Behind him, an unfamiliar, deep voice swore as the youngest Ishiyama beelined for the stairs. Hiroki’s heart hammered, certain he would feel, at any moment now, a large hand closing around his pajamas. But whether because the intruder didn’t care to pursue him or was more focused on his parents, he made his way to the first floor unhindered.

He almost tripped over a small, warm and *still* body lying in the dark. Lychee. Hiroki paused long enough to check the little dog was still breathing--just asleep. Then he ran straight for the front door, not even stopping for shoes or a coat.

He tried desperately to recall Yumi’s friends’ numbers. Most of them he didn’t know. But Odd—right, Odd gave him his in case an emergency happened! He’d probably meant an emergency about *Lychee*, but right then Hiroki didn’t care. He just needed to get help.

And so, running into the night, he began to dial.
With a smirk, Grigory turned away from the dazed forms of the Ishiyamas, still prone and in their pajamas. He tapped at the display on the back of his right glove; from a port underneath it, a memory card was spat out. Taking it with gentle reverence, Grigory placed it aside for just a moment. Then he pulled both black leather gloves off, taking care not to tug on the plastic wires entwined around the fingers or the electrodes on the pads. Wouldn’t do to damage these, oh no.

He set them down beside the card. Then, bending, he picked up the small briefcase he’d brought with him and withdrew a soft-cover album. Within were duplicates of all the data he’d obtained with this glove. This archive was so precious and undisclosed, he never parted with it; not even Hannibal Mago knew of its existence. It was his personal insurance policy, a collection of secrets and blackmail that could set him up for life once he was ready to retire.

Right as he was straightening up, Hannibal and Scipio burst out into wild barks. Startled, he fumbled and dropped the album. It split open; cards spilled onto the ground. Grigory swore. The dogs had been brought and left outside as guards, so their barking meant someone was approaching the house. Probably that little brat and whoever he’d gone to fetch. His heart raced.

Don’t panic, don’t panic. It’s just a little accident. Lots of little accidents happen in life, they can always be recovered from. Except he didn’t have time --

Frantic, he swept up the cards. He didn’t have time to stow them each in their individual sleeves, so he hastily stuffed them, and his latest acquisition, in his trenchcoat pocket instead. Grigory then placed the gloves and album back in the briefcase, straining his ears for the sound of footsteps coming up the hall.

Nothing yet. But the bed was creaking; the Ishiyamas must be stirring.

He snapped the briefcase shut, strode to the window, threw it open, and made his escape.

---

Odd peered at the Ishiyama residence. In the darkness of night, it seemed like a sleeping giant.

He’d been playing video games when his phone had rung wildly. Hiroki had been rambling and it had been hard to pick some things out, but he’d gotten the idea that someone had broken into the Ishiyama household. Possibly the man with the dogs.

He’d quickly called Jeremie and Aelita. William had been meeting with the former--back early from Brussels for some reason--and tagged along. Now they, plus Hiroki, had returned to the Ishiyama household. It had been agreed that Richard and Eva were too new and inexperienced in combat to come along. Jeremie was a bit worried about whether they actually could fight this guy, but Odd was beyond confident. They’d fought XANA’s spectres countless times, and those things were way tougher than any adult could be.

As they approached, they heard a series of loud, deep barks—that was all the confirmation Odd needed. He might still be here! Without waiting for the others, he threw open the still-unlocked
front door and exploded into the house.

It was dark, and the dogs’ barking was already fading, growing distant. They, and their owner, were escaping! *Where is he?* He strained his ears, but could hear nothing. With a quiet curse, he fumbled for the light switch--

The scene it revealed made his heart leap in his throat. “Kiwi!” he cried, intruder immediately forgotten.

His dog was curled up on the living room floor, still covered in bandages, eyes closed. Odd ran straight to him, frantic eyes scrambling over his precious buddy. *No, no, no no no…*

Then he saw the rise and fall of his flanks. He exhaled enormously, feeling all the tension and fear be expelled with it. Kiwi wasn’t dead. Just sleeping.

“He fell silent all of a sudden,” Hiroki recalled, entering with the others. “The guy must have tranquilized him or used a sleeping pill or something.”

Footsteps had all of them leaping into defensive positions; Odd, Aelita, and William raised their fists for a fight, while Jeremie had the look of a cornered animal. Odd felt Hiroki move behind him, and a surge of protectiveness coursed through him. He was Yumi’s family and Yumi was practically Odd’s family; nothing would happen to them on his watch!

*Hey, maybe this is how being an older sibling is supposed to feel like,* sisters.

But it was just Mr. Ishiyama, coming downstairs in his pajamas. “Dad!” Hiroki yelled, running over. “Dad, are you okay?”

“No, not okay at all! I’m running late for work!”

“What? Dad, it’s the middle of the night!”

“You think he’ll care? No rest for the weary, that’s what Walter says…”

William moved to join Hiroki in gently holding Mr. Ishiyama back from going outside. Odd glanced at Jeremie, fists dropping, bewildered. What was this?

“Hiroki, call the hospital,” Jeremie decided. “Not the cops, and don’t mention the intruder. But if your parents’ heads have been hit or something, it should definitely be checked out.”

“On it!” The small boy darted away. By now Mrs. Ishiyama was also downstairs and heading for the kitchen. William had apparently decided that letting her cook breakfast was less harmful than letting Mr. Ishiyama out in his state.

“Odd, you, Aelita and I will split up and look for clues.”

Odd barely gave him a nod of acknowledgment before he made a beeline for the parents’ room. If this creepy guy had gone after them, that was the most likely place he’d been in, and had the best chance for clues, he figured.

Entering the tidy room, Odd turned on the lights. He immediately spotted signs of an invader: the window was thrown wide open, and looking down, he could see tracks in the mud, leading away. There were scuff marks on the otherwise shiny floor. And…what was that?

He crouched. There, half-hidden under the nightstand. There was something small, grey and
plastic. If the rest of this room hadn’t been so clean, he would have overlooked it. He picked it up; it looked like some kind of memory card, like for a camera.

Odd frowned, turning it over and checking the other side. Nothing; nothing to indicate the make or who it belonged to. He glanced back to where he’d found it. It was near the scuff marks; near where, theoretically, the invader had been standing.

Maybe the invader had dropped it without noticing? If so, it might have a clue. He pocketed it.

Odd searched the rest of the upper level, but didn’t turn up anything else. He returned downstairs to find everyone waiting for him in the kitchen. Plates of miso soup and rice were laid out; Mrs. Ishiyama was setting a final one before her husband, who had, it seemed, been convinced to sit down, at least for the moment. Perking up, Odd snatched a spoon and dug in.

Next to him, William was wolfing down his food with a speed to rival his own. Through a mouthful of rice, Odd said, “You look like hell.”

And where are Ulrich and Yumi? Why are you back and they aren’t?

“You wouldn’t believe the kind of day I’ve had.”

“I’ve heard it myself and I’m still wrapping my head around it,” Jeremie said.

A concerned look crossed Aelita’s face. “Are you okay, William?”

“Yeah, I’m just--”

“Who cares? What about Ulrich and Yumi?” Odd interrupted. William’s face twisted in anger, and he started to rise--

“We’ll talk about it later!” Jeremie said sharply. He glanced pointedly at Hiroki. Slowly, reluctantly, both boys settled down.

“Now, is an ambulance on the way, Hiroki?” the blonde prodigy continued.

“Mhm. I told them I was up playing games when my parents started acting funny, and I didn’t know why.”

“Okay, good. I didn’t find anything. Odd, Aelita?”

His ‘cousin’ shook her head. *Looks like I’m the hero!* Odd preened a bit as he pulled out the card-thingy. “This was near the intruder’s entry point. I dunno if it’s one of Mr. Ishiyama’s files or not, but I thought it was worth checking out.”

“I’ve never seen Dad use anything like that,” Hiroki said. The adult Ishiyamas didn’t seem to notice they were being talked about, instead happily chatting about what a lovely day it was.

“Then I should definitely take a look at it,” Jeremie concluded. “I’ll get started tonight…”

Odd shook his head. “Einstein, take a look in the mirror. You’re exhausted. Eva can handle technical support; isn’t that why we brought her on?”

Indeed, the short genius was looking more ragged. Scouring for clues about Anthea, watching the Hermitage, building equipment, wrestling with those codes; it was all taking a toll on him. Dark circles were under his eyes, and earlier today--yesterday?--he’d granted Odd his portion of lunch. And sure, Odd loved more food, but that wasn’t a good sign.
Even as Jeremie tried a denial, a yawn betrayed him. “Fine, fine,” he said, giving up. “You win. Bring it to her first thing in the morning--if you don’t get caught.”

“Hey, with love and friendship on the line, how could I possibly get caught?” He chased the last few grains of rice with his spoon and popped them in his mouth.

Then, the faint wail of a siren reached his ears, then. The ambulance. It was drawing close, probably less than a minute away. No time for seconds, I guess...

“Do you want me to stay with you while you ride to the hospital, Hiroki?” Aelita asked kindly, as they all pushed aside their plates.

He shook his head. “Nah, I’m good. But thanks.”

“Keep us updated,” William told him as he moved for the door, tugging his parents along.

The group made to rise, but Jeremie made an abortive gesture. “Hold on. Before we head out, there’s one more thing I have to say, now that Hiroki’s not here.”

“What’s up?”

“I lied. I did find something in the garden--paw prints. The intruder was the man with the dogs. But I didn’t see a reason to make Hiroki more worried than he already is.”

Aelita’s mouth was puckered into a frown, her brow creased with anxiety. “Don’t you think we should tell him? What if he’s in danger?”

Jeremie shook his head. “I don’t think he is. The man with the dogs only went after Mr. and Mrs. Ishiyama; he didn’t chase Hiroki when he ran. I don’t know why he attacked them, but I think we should all be on our guards.”

“More than we already are?” Odd joked. He slapped Jeremie on the shoulder. “No problema, Einstein. Now let’s get back to Kadic before Jim notices anything--and so you can get some sleep!”

---

Sunday morning was warm, for January; the falling snow today was more like sleet. Still, dark clouds loomed in the sky, and a violent wind shook the trees of Rue André René. Two rows of small, tidy houses with black roofs and white wooden walls lined up on both sides of the street. As Odd hurried down it, occasionally glancing between the paper in his hands and the numbers on the surrounding houses, he felt the sleet raining on his head pick up speed.

Within a few seconds, he was engulfed in a roaring deluge. In a few more, his blonde hair was plastered to his skull and his clothes felt like a second skin. Odd shot off like an arrow, ducking under what trees he could. Distantly, he heard thunder.

The roads and sidewalks had been scraped of ice, but with the torrent of sleet, they were quickly become slippery again. Despite that, he maintained solid footing and darted swiftly, without falling. Odd threw quick glances at the letterboxes, searching for Eva’s. Twenty, nineteen, eighteen--there!
He darted onto the doorstep, which had a canopy to shelter him from the sleet storm. Shivering, he rang the doorbell. *Ugh, I must look like a drowned cat!*

No response. He tried again, and then a third time, in case he wasn’t pushing hard enough. Finally, the door opened, revealing Eva in her usual black and red ensemble. She smiled at him. “Odd! Hi!”

“Hi!” Suddenly, he realized it was only half past eight, and he’d rung the doorbell several times. He felt himself flush. “I haven’t woken your parents, have I?”

“No, no, I’m alone. They’re at work.”

*On a Sunday?*

He shrugged; hey, his own parents often had crazy work schedules. “Anyway, I was coming over to see you. Mind if I come in and dry off?”

“Oh, please! You’re drenched...get undressed!”

Those words stopped Odd dead in his tracks. *U-Undress? And she mentioned she’s alone...c-could she be...*

*No, get ahold of yourself! She’s just being polite. Though...there’s nothing wrong with hoping...*  
“No, you have any clothes I could borrow from your father?”

“Nope!”

As she led him through the foyer, Odd looked around. Her house was surprisingly barren; there were no photos on the walls, nor decorative plants or rugs. The living room had nothing but a charging laptop and a...wristwatch, which Eva snatched up. The kitchen and connected dining room were slightly better—they at least had basic essentials like a fridge and a microwave, but no tables or chairs. There was an astonishing lack of cooking utensils, too, as if the owners were content to live on whatever they could just heat up.

“Where’s the bathroom?”

“Over there, at the end of the hallway,” she indicated.

Following the hallway, he passed two other bedrooms; only one had an actual bed, and nothing else. He was almost afraid of the bathroom’s state, but while it was also plain, it did have a sink, a toilet, and towels. Odd used one to fix his hair.

He stripped out of his wet clothes, hanging them on the towel’s rack. His T-shirt had been under his jacket and was still dry, so he kept that on, but everything else save his underwear? Soaked. He wrapped the towel around his waist for modesty and returned to the living room.

Eva was on the floor, her laptop on her knees. She glanced up at his entrance and snickered. “Hold on, I’ll get you something to wear.”

She disappeared into one of the rooms and returned with a fluorescent pink tracksuit. Odd sighed, but took it and returned to the bathroom to change. He grimaced; it was too bright, too tight, and the pants too long--Eva was a fair bit taller than him.

Eva outright laughed when he emerged. For a moment, something about it seemed mean, delightfully cruel; his sisters’ laughs. Instinctively, Odd felt a desire to sink into the floor.
But in the next heartbeat, it was nothing more than honest amusement. Odd relaxed. “So I take it your folks are the spartan type, huh?”

She just stared. Odd winced. I shouldn’t have said that. Her home life might have been a touchy subject. “Or, y’know, maybe your stuff is still being shipped from overseas. Are you sure you don’t wanna stay at the dorms while you wait for it?”

Eva’s smile, already wavering, disappeared faster than one of his plates of food. “I’m fine.”

“Oh, pfft, yeah, I getcha. It’s, uh...unique here. Very ‘you’!”

Why can’t I stop putting my foot in my mouth around her?!

Cringing, he sat next to her and pulled out the memory card. “I wanted to ask for your help with this thing. I found it and I’m not sure how to use it.”

Eva snatched it out of his hands. Holding it between two slim fingers, she held it up and turned it this way and that. Her eyes shone, almost as if she could see right through it. Then, with another of her trademark bright smiles, she slipped it into her laptop and typed at the keyboard. “It’s a video,” she said after a few moments. “I’m starting it.”

An image appeared on the screen, and Odd gasped. It was a woman in a ragged brown dress. She was in a wooden chair, her arms tied around the back. Her head was bowed.

And thick, pink hair obscured her face.

That hair color...! It can’t be a coincidence, can it?!

Suddenly, a newspaper-- THE INVESTIGATOR-- blocked the screen. It was held by a hand in a black glove, though male or female, Odd couldn’t say. The date had been highlighted in yellow: 2nd of May, 1994.

Odd didn’t even realize his hand had covered his mouth until he tried to speak. He quickly removed it, but his shocked awe remained. “That’s not long before Aelita and her dad went to Lyoko! And that hair...that’s definitely got to be her mom!”

We found her!

The hand withdrew, taking the newspaper with it. The woman’s head slowly lifted, and new revulsion coursed through Odd. The skin around one of her eyes was a swollen purple-black. She began to speak. “I’m doing fine, Waldo. Don’t worry about me; they’re keeping me prisoner, but everything will be...”

Her mouth worked. Her throat bobbed. Tears filled her blue eyes. “How’s Aelita? It’s been years since I’ve seen her...she must be going to middle school by now. Does she remember me at all? I’d give anything to hug her...”

Odd’s heart went out to her as she sniffled. A masculine voice yelled from off-screen, “Finish it! Say what you know and that’s enough!”

Anthea’s face was full of hatred as she glared at whoever was holding the camera. “Waldo,” she continued, tears still streaming down her cheeks, “these men are making me ask you to return to working on Carthage. If you do, they’ll free me and then we can be a family again, you, me, and Aelita...”

Then, in a rapid, frightened rush, she added, “Don’t do it! They’ll never let me go and they want to kill you. Forget about me, save yourselves, get far away--”
A large, male silhouette entered the image, blocking Anthea from view. Odd barely caught a glimpse of a fist raised to strike before everything disappeared in a shower of sparks. The video stopped.

Aghast, he leapt to his feet, almost knocking the laptop over. “We’ve got to get this to Jeremie and Aelita right away!”

Eva didn’t answer. Her eyes were wide, mouth moving soundlessly. She seemed to be deep in thought. What’s there to think about?! This was major! This was Aelita’s mom! Oh, where was his phone? He patted himself down--oh, duh, it was still with his wet clothes--

Suddenly and swiftly, Eva stood. She spun on a heel and smiled at him. It was all so abrupt it gave Odd pause. “Yes. You’re right. This is an important discovery.”

She moved closer.

Was the air growing colder, or was that just him?

“I never would have found it without you.”

Her phrasing...something about it was weird, right?

Eva was very close now. Odd immediately became distracted from those weird thoughts by her scent--something oceanic--and the proximity. There were only centimeters of space between their bodies. She placed her hands on his shoulders and gazed down at him with a smile. “I think you deserve a reward, right?”

Then she leaned in and kissed him. Odd relaxed, winding his arms around her. Her hands dragged down to wrap around him as well. Their mouths molded together. Her tongue prodded his lips, and happily, he opened them.

Something made its way inside his mouth. His brow furrowed. It felt and tasted like...smoke? Surprised, he tried to break the kiss, but Eva’s arms tightened painfully.

Surprise became alarm. He pushed at her, tried to lean back, tried to wrestle away. All in vain. Her arms were like iron bands. And something--something was pressing against his eyes, his skin, his skull, trying to force him out. He was getting dizzy, finding it harder to focus. What was--

A flash of insight crossed his mind like a falling star.

XANA?!

And then everything went black.

---

Excellent. He could directly possess the Lyoko Warriors. Originally, he hadn’t planned to try that. Originally, he’d planned to replicate his little Valentine’s Day gift for Aelita--in a new form, of course--and gift it to either her or Odd, whichever came first, and possess them that way. Once he was in the inner circle, he could really get some sabotage going. He’d only just finished the trinket today; if the kiss had failed, he would have knocked Odd out, forced the wristwatch on, and held
him hostage for as long as it took the possession to kick in.

He’d been loathe to risk injuring his vessel, and by extension himself, though. So he’d taken a calculated gamble, and won. He’d prevented the Lyoko Warriors from finding out about the Green Phoenix, he’d gained a new piece of blackmail to use on the Green Phoenix, and now he knew the Lyoko Warriors weren’t immune to his direct possession.

All this ran through XANA’s head as he kept Odd immobile. Being split, he didn’t feel the process of integration, but he was in open communication with his other half. He knew the exact moment the possession was complete.

Seeing through two different perspectives--being in two different places at once--was impossible to describe in human terms. XANA just was. He was releasing his male vessel while he was taking a step back as his male vessel. He was rubbing Odd’s bruised limbs while he was wiping Eva’s mouth.

_Bleh. I don’t know why humans find exchanging spit pleasurable._ Kissing was mildly interesting, he supposed, but more as an exploration of textures than anything emotional. But it was a useful tool, and he wasn’t one to turn such things down.

He stretched out in his new vessel, testing his control. It was so much easier than driving Eva; XANA was already feeling more comfortable in this boy’s skin. He scanned Odd’s memories, pushing aside everything unimportant to hone in on what the fool had been sharing with the others. _Belpois knows Eva is working on examining this card...the Ishiyamas were attacked by Grigory Nictopalos...William’s back from Brussels..._

_Calculating probabilities..._ Ulrich and Yumi still hadn’t returned, but once they did, they would probably be distracted by checking on the Ishiyamas. Aelita would want to meet with Richard again. The only ones at Kadic would be Jeremie and William--and they might well want to speak with the Ishiyamas or the lovebirds.

In short, Jeremie’s room had a high chance of being unguarded. And now he had two bodies to work with.

XANA smirked. “Well,” he said out loud, testing Odd’s voice. “I don’t think I’ll have a better opportunity than this.”
Jeremie had been having a terrible day. The past three weeks had been busy, but this morning particularly so. After that business with William, Odd, and the Ishiyamas, Jeremie had returned to Kadic about one in the morning. He’d been woken up by Yumi and Ulrich calling that they’d taken the 6:30 am train, and they’d gone to her house, and where were her parents?! Then came their reports, working on the codes, planning today’s later group meeting--oh, and fitting tomorrow’s homework somewhere in there too.

And now, across from him, Aelita was scarfing down her food as fast as possible. She could have actually put Odd to shame! Jeremie, eating slower, watched in vague disbelief as she piled spaghetti in her mouth, threw back a glass of milk, and leapt to her feet. He couldn’t help feeling a little insulted, as if she were trying to escape his company.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“Richard’s waiting for me in the café we went to yesterday,” she said, grinning. “We’re gonna continue our discussion--I can’t wait!”

His chest tightened. “I don’t understand what you find so interesting about him!”

“Come on, Jeremie! He was a friend! He knew me before I got stuck on Lyoko. He always came over to my place, and he knows so much about a time in my life that I don’t remember anymore!”

Everything she was saying just made the coil around his heart squeeze harder. “Yeah, but you don’t have to get so excited about it.”

“Why not?” she asked, sounding hurt. Then her eyes narrowed suspiciously. “Are you jealous?”

“Jealous, me?” he scoffed. “Are you kidding? Jealous of a fool who doesn’t even know how to turn on a computer--”

“Jeremie, stop it!” she snapped. “You’re being really mean.”

“Mean?! ”

“Yes! You’re insulting one of my friends and getting huffy that I want to talk to him!”

“I’m not stopping you, am I?!”

“No, but you aren’t supporting me! This is a piece of my past I’ve found! I don’t understand why you can’t be happy for me!”

Before he could retort, Aelita glanced at her watch and grimaced. “I’ve got to go. I can’t be late.”

She stormed away. Jeremie watched her pink hair vanish into the crowded Kadic cafeteria and ground his teeth.

She doesn’t understand? Why can’t she understand me? He just wanted a bit of reassurance that she still liked him...

He returned to his meal alone.

Wait...alone?
Jeremie quickly scanned the cafeteria. Ulrich and Yumi were visiting her parents, so their absence was expected. And he hadn’t seen William today—Sissi had even asked him about it, then gone off to hunt him down. But more concerning...nowhere did he see that spike of blonde hair or hear an obnoxiously loud voice demanding thirds.

*Odd never misses a meal. Where is he?*

He’d said he was going to Eva’s. Maybe with the storm that hit the city, he’d just gotten stuck there?

Jeremie snorted. *Stuck with the girl of his dreams. How horrible for him.*

Meanwhile, the girl of his dreams was angry at him and off to meet with another guy.

He sighed, suddenly not wanting to be here anymore. He snatched up an apple and began heading back to his room. He could get some more studying done of those strange Hoppix codes. Maybe this time, he’d discover what they were for…

But the moment he entered his room, he froze. He stared at his desk, petrified. The dossier wasn’t there anymore.

And he hadn’t made a copy.

Hoping against hope that perhaps it had just slipped off, or that he’d misremembered where he’d placed it, Jeremie frantically searched the rest of his room. When that failed to turn up the dossier, he sat back on his bed, head in his hands.

*You idiot, Belpois. Didn’t you learn anything from Franz Hopper’s diaries? Always make a backup!* Stupid, stupid of him to think XANA was the only one who would ever attack their resources.

After a moment of resigned horror, he rose to inspect the lock on his door. It hadn’t been damaged in any way, but he knew he always locked it. If it hadn’t been forced open, it must have been picked. And, given that nothing else in his room was out of place, whoever had done it must have known exactly what they wanted to take.

But who?

---

If anyone had been passing by Delmas’s office at that moment, they would have seen an unusual and almost cruel smirk on Eva’s face as she slipped out. They likely would have wondered how the girl had gotten past a locked door, or why she was there in the first place.

But, perhaps fortunately, perhaps not, no one was there. And so XANA made his exit unnoticed.

*Offense and defense in one spectacular move,* he thought smugly. *Really, children, you should count yourselves lucky the principal didn’t check on that dossier. I’m doing you a favor.*

And at the same time, all the way back in Eva’s house, XANA, in Odd’s body, was feeding those codes into his laptop. A single glance at those sheets was all it had taken for him to memorize their
contents with photographic quality. Now the dossier was back where it belonged, the codes were out of those kids’ hands, and he was well on his way to winning this game.

Yes, XANA thought, actually humming a little, today was a very good day.

---

Aelita wouldn’t say it, but the man with the dogs was scaring her. Between wandering around the Hermitage, attacking Kiwi, and now attacking Yumi’s parents, he was shaping up to be a kind of threat they’d never faced before. Perhaps not as dangerous as XANA, in terms of sheer power, but dangerous in that they didn’t know how to fight him or who he was working for. He could very well be the vanguard of greater troubles.

So she was relieved to find her friends shared her caution. Jeremie had, in fact, decreed they should keep themselves hidden as long as possible. And the best way was to hide in plain sight. So today they would be meeting around five o’clock at the Cafe au Lait.

They trickled in separately; Ulrich and Yumi arrived first, ostensibly for a date. Aelita came in next, chatting with William. Richard was third, just another adult grabbing a bite. Then Odd and Eva, holding hands--she smiled at the sight. Awww.

“No guesses as to where you two have been all day,” Ulrich teased.

The pair only gave matching, conspiratorial grins.

Jeremie was last. Once he was there, they gravitated towards a table in the back, away from windows. She glanced at him guiltily--she felt bad for yelling at him as she had. But she was just so tired of him shooting down her enthusiasm. This, all those times with her music...

He didn’t look at her as he got straight to business. “William, Yumi, and Ulrich each gave me a condensed report as soon as they got back to Kadic. I have an idea about what happened in Brussels--”

“We found a Replika!” William burst out. Aelita gasped. Eva and Odd looked intrigued. Richard looked puzzled.

“Yeah, and there was this ghost--”

“And then the men in black came--”

“And we split up to escape--”

“Calm down, you two!” Jeremie exclaimed, cutting off Ulrich and William’s burst of excitement. “Share what you found, but in an orderly fashion, please.”

Aelita’s eyes widened when William and Ulrich described the city they’d seen. That was exactly like that one she’d visited Mr. X in! That was why neither she nor Richard could find anything about him! He must be an AI!

Then her heart sank. They’d said the city was empty and ruined. Had something happened to Mr. X? She thought of her nightmare, of XANA consuming that place and her friend, and shuddered.
A tiny seed of a suggestion tried to grow in the back of her mind. Her subconscious took one look at it and stomped it out. Before it could cross her conscious mind or even take root, it had been eliminated, discarded, and forgotten about. Aelita never became aware of it.

She absorbed the details of the city, the appearance of her father’s ghost, the escape from the men in black. She was so proud of William’s bravery and happy when Yumi and Ulrich commended it. Choked up about Daddy. Afraid of the reappearance of her oldest, most persistent enemies.

But there was no time for her to sort through all her feelings, for it was her group’s turn to share stories. Yumi had already learned of what happened to her parents, but her throat still worked as Jeremie described the events of that night. Ulrich put an arm around her shoulder, his own expression stoic save for his concerned eyes. Eva’s face was blank—with shock, Aelita thought—and Richard’s empathetic.

“And they’re fine?” the adult prompted.

“I saw them this morning, and checked on them again before I came here,” Yumi said. “They’re a bit confused, but not hurt. They’ve been released from the hospital, even.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

Jeremie twisted to look at the other two blondes, who had been mostly silent thus far. “Finally, Odd found a strange disk that we think the intruder dropped. We decided to let Eva look at it. Did you find anything?”

“A virus,” Eva said, wrinkling her nose. “It shot my laptop to hell. I think that guy may have dropped it on purpose.”

“You think he was trying to sabotage us?” Aelita asked.

“Yeah, exactly.”

“Are you sure?” Yumi interrupted suddenly. “Maybe Jeremie should take a look at it.”

They all turned to her, surprised. “Yumi, what are you saying?” Odd exclaimed.

“Just that we don’t know how skilled Eva really is. Teaching you something you didn’t know about computers isn’t exactly hard. Maybe this virus isn’t as bad as she says.”

And underneath, Aelita could read exactly what she wasn’t saying: or maybe it doesn’t exist.

Mortification at Yumi’s suspicion flooded her. She turned to apologize to Eva, but her friend didn’t seem upset. Instead, she met Yumi’s stare evenly. She reached into her red jean jacket, withdrew a square piece of plastic, and slammed it on the table. “Go ahead,” she said.

Silence fell.

“I know you don’t trust me for whatever reason, but I like Odd and I like Aelita. I want to help them. And if Jeremie puts that in his computer, it’s gonna wreck it, too.”

Yumi didn’t say anything. She just stared at the card, as if surprised. Aelita looked around the table. Suddenly, it seemed as if there were cracks spreading in their once-solid group. Yumi’s hidden accusation had drawn a line in the sand, and people were starting to line up on its sides. She could envision how it would play out. Odd would side with Eva. William...since he knew the pain of being a suspected newcomer, probably Eva. Ulrich with Yumi. Jeremie with Yumi.
Richard...she didn’t know.

And her? How was she supposed to pick between one of her oldest friends and a newest? She hadn’t known Eva that long, yes, but Aelita felt something between them. A kinship of kinds. Like she could just tell this girl anything.

But Yumi...Yumi had fought beside her more times than she could count. Given her someone to share girl talk with. Showed up for her concerts. Been a sister to her.

*I can’t let them fight. I have to figure out how to help them get along.*

She took a breath, preparing a diplomatic plea--

And Jeremie pushed the card back to Eva, to Aelita’s surprise. “We can’t fight amongst ourselves. If we do, we won’t accomplish anything.”

Like a popped balloon, the tension drained away. Aelita wasn’t sure whether to bless Jeremie’s leadership, as he took charge again, or be disappointed by her missed opportunity. “Now, in the meantime, I’ve formulated a hypothesis about all this. If William and Ulrich both seemed to see Hopper in the Replika they found…”

“Uh, there wasn’t anything ‘seeming’ about it,” William said. “He was there.”

“...that means the Replika was constructed by Hopper, and he inserted a copy of himself to give us clues.”

“So the men in black,” Yumi said. Her voice was somewhat tight, but she was accepting Jeremie’s decision. “Who knows how many times they’ve observed this mysterious city and spoken with him?”

The bespectacled boy frowned. “Yes, that is a problem. And I’d love to know what Ms. Hertz’s role in all this is. But I think we can start to see a clearer picture: there are the codes in Richard’s palm-computer, the codes in Hertz’s dossier, and now this Replika. It’s like a series of clues we have to follow.”

Hope suddenly gripped Aelita’s heart in a tight fist. She inhaled sharply. “Maybe...maybe they’re clues for finding my mother.”

“That’s certainly a possibility. Hopper’s last wish for you was to solve that mystery. But the problem is, the file with the code disappeared, and I don’t know who took it or why.”

“Professor Hertz, maybe?” Richard suggested.

“She never goes into the students’ rooms. No, it was someone else.”

“And we can’t forget about the people who chased us in Brussels,” Ulrich reminded everyone. “So now we’ve got two enemies we barely know about: the men in black, who were armed and had a helicopter and cars and who knows what else, and this man with two dogs, who’s sniffing around the Hermitage and attacked Yumi’s parents.”

“Could he be part of the men in black?” William wondered.

But Jeremie shook his head. “Impossible. They operate in different ways. The man with the dogs acts alone, with technology straight out of science fiction, and he doesn’t care about laws. The men in black seem more like a government force. Do you have any idea of the number of authorizations
required to fly a helicopter above a city? The police definitely knew about them and left them alone. So, yes, Ulrich’s right: besides us, there are two other groups investigating Franz Hopper.”

A somber mood fell upon them at that proclamation. What have I done? Aelita thought. All she’d wanted was to find her mother, and yes, she’d known that would be difficult...but she didn’t think it would be this dangerous. The men in black? Another unknown organization? Her friend’s dogs and parents being attacked? She wanted to tell everyone “Stop! Don’t get hurt for my sake!”

But this was bigger than just her. This wasn’t just finding her mother, but protecting her father’s legacy. This man had attacked the Ishiyamas; her gut told her not by chance. He may already know about them all. And in that case, pushing her friends away wouldn’t protect them.

Still, if there was anything she could do to take the brunt of the burden unto herself, Aelita vowed she would.

Finally, Jeremie let out a long sigh. “Guys. We’re gonna need to be very careful moving forward. I know you two…” He looked at Aelita and William. “…want to bring Sissi in, but this is a delicate situation. I don’t think it’s a good idea, at least not yet. We already have three new people, and I’d rather not introduce a new element so soon.”

William’s fist curled up, and Aelita thought that telling Sissi was more important to him than he let on. He was, she realized with a start, in the same position she’d been in not too long ago--trying to balance two groups of friends, lying to one for the sake of the other. Reaching over, she patted his arm with a small, sympathetic smile.

He exhaled and nodded slowly. “Alright. What’s our first step, Einstein?”

“If you don’t mind, Richard, I’d like to borrow your palm-computer and start studying the codes. I have a series of notes on the whole thing in my room.”

“I can help,” Eva immediately offered.

“No, focus on fixing your laptop. If that virus is as sophisticated as all the other tech that man has used, it could take ages to purge it.”

She pouted. “Alright…”

“The rest of you can take shifts watching the Hermitage tonight. I’ll tinker a bit, find a way to hook your laptops into the security loop there.”

“Good to me, boss,” Ulrich said, and various nods and murmurs of assent echoed around the table.

---

It was approaching noon, and Dido was alone. She’d even told Maggie to take an early lunch break with her friends. She didn’t want anyone around to potentially overhear the conversation she was about to have.

Trust no one. That was her motto. Just because she had access to the best security technology on the market did not mean she should be lax. There was always the chance Maggie was listening in on and recording her phone calls.
Dido moved around her office, extracting three different keys from three different spots. With them, she opened a secret drawer in her desk. From it, she withdrew a tattered moleskin journal. It was filled with codes, most decoy; she flipped past them to the page she wanted.

Going to her computer, she entered the stream of numbers and letters—a very long password. Once it was in, the telephone number she needed popped up on the screen. Dido activated all anti-intercept protections she had, and dialled it.

On the third ring, the speaker answered. The voice was distorted by static, as was Dido’s. But she could easily picture the face, its lizard-eyes and gold canines and smirking mouth. They’d only met thrice, but thrice was enough. “Madame. It’s been a long time. The line is secure, I imagine?”

“Of course, Hannibal.”

“Good. So, to what do I owe this pleasure?”

“The network in France is operational again. And we’ve just discovered that one of your men is there. Judging by his modus operandi, I suspect it’s Grigory Nictapolus.”

“A fine, educated guess, madame.”

“It’s not hard,” she said drily. “Whenever you need dirty work done, you always send that man and his horrid dogs.”

“So? Surely you didn’t call just about that.”

“So, I want to know: why, after all this time, did you send him to Kadic? What did you find? What is he looking for?”

She heard the man harumph. “You are hardly one to make such demands, madame. I’m still not pleased about your little intervention in 1994. The Green Phoenix sponsored Hopper—that factory and Lyoko rightfully belonged us! And you went in and mucked everything up.”

She bristled. Mago knew how much she hated the reminder that Hopper escaped from her, damn him. “Hopper’s work belonged with the government, not your...organization. I know the kind of things the Green Phoenix gets up to. How’s Anthea these days?”

Mago tsk’ed. “Come now, you can’t expect me tell you anything about her situation? I’ve never done so before. A new game has started, and I certainly won’t show off my cards before I’ve played them.”

Underneath the table, Dido clenched a fist. Wily old bastard…

But that was why he’d earned his nickname “The Magician”. Once a poor, cultureless son of farmers, he’d manipulated, stolen, and murdered his way to the top of the criminal underworld in true cutthroat fashion. He’d spirited away Franz Hopper’s wife, forever securing one of the best bargaining chips against the man should he find him. And furthermore, he’d found a way to keep Anthea, always thwarting rescue attempts until they no longer bothered.

“Then you’re after the supercomputer again,” she concluded.

From what she knew, Hopper had kept his lab’s location an absolute secret. The only people who’d known had either been taken care of or vanished before Dido could extract it from them. She had cursed Hopper’s paranoia countless times in her fruitless searches, but now, she was glad for it. Even if she didn’t know where the fabled supercomputer was hidden, at least the Green Phoenix
didn’t, either.

“Really, must you sound so sour? I believe we’re united in this matter. You want Carthage buried once and for all; we can do that. All you need to do is stay out of our way.”

Fat chance.

She opened her mouth to throw a sharp retort at Mago, but he’d already hung up.

---

Her dream had been one of terrifying, disjointed images: the man with two dogs chasing her through that sci-fi city, Mr. X melting into a black puddle, her father’s ghost turning into a ball of light and exploding, her mother’s sobbing voice echoing around her. When Aelita woke up, she was covered in sweat, shaking in fear, and crying. She spent the next few moments sniffing and wiping her eyes.

When she’d put the ghost of the nightmare to rest, Aelita finally looked around to get her bearings. Yes, she’d sleepwalked again; this time she was behind a television set. The room was almost empty, save for a sofa. The door was so low one would need to crawl to get through.

Her lips parted. This is...the secret room in the Hermitage? In my sleep, I walked all the way through the sewers, to the Hermitage, to here?

She should consider herself lucky no harm had befallen her. But why had she come here? This was the third time her subconscious had brought her along this path; there must be a reason.

A bit lost, she turned back to the white wall she’d woken up facing. Examining it closely, she could see scratch marks all over, as if a desperate animal had tried to claw through. When she looked at her hands, she saw that her nails were full of plaster and the ends of her fingers had blood on them.

Aelita frowned. She pressed her ear against the wall and tapped it several times. Her eyes widened-it sounded hollow! Her mind flashed back to what that builder, Philippe Broulet, had said: “I had to return to the Hermitage and wall up a section of the house, so as to create a hidden room invisible room the outside.”

A section, he said! Not just one room! There was more right in front of us and we didn’t see it!

Excited, she hurried back to the storeroom to search for something, anything she could use to break through the wall. Let’s see, bricks, sacks, mason tools...a pickaxe! That’s perfect! It was lying at an angle against the wall; she dragged it into the secret room.

Then, Aelita began to push the television set away from the wall. Sweat poured down her forehead and into her eyes from the effort. Her breath came in short pants. Her muscles ached. But Aelita didn’t care about fatigue. Not when she was so close to finding another secret.

Finally, there was enough space for her to strike at the wall. When she picked up the pickaxe, the handle slipped through her sweaty palms; her first strike merely chipped the primer. Gritting her teeth, Aelita wiped her hands on her nightgown. She shifted her grip on the pickaxe, took a deep breath, and swung again.
Dust and debris billowed out, stinging her eyes. She accidentally inhaled some and coughed in spurts. The wall had given way in one hit; it must have been built with the intent to be easily demolished. Her father had *wanted* her to discover this new secret room.

The hole she’d made was only thirty centimeters wide, so, taking the pickaxe again, she struck the wall a second time to enlarge it. When she was done, she stepped through and gaped. One thought ran through her head:

*Jeremie has to see this right away...*
She didn’t have her phone, so Aelita had no choice but to run all the way back to Kadic. Slipping unseen into the dorms, she paused at her room long enough to put on a pair of jeans and a pink sweatshirt. Then she rushed to Jeremie’s room and knocked urgently at the door. *Come on, come on...*

Finally, it opened. Jeremie stood on the other side, hair mussed from sleep, glasses crooked on his face, eyes half-closed. “Ugh...whossit?”

“It’s me, Aelita!”

He seemed to come awake at the sound of her voice. “Aelita?” He blinked rapidly, removed his glasses to rub his eyes, put them back on. “What time is it? What are you doing here?”

“Come on! We have to hurry!”

“But--”

“Get dressed! It’s very important!”

“Okay, okay...”

He closed the door. Aelita waited a few moments as fabric rustled on the other side, bouncing on her heels; she felt ready to burst from holding in the secret she’d discovered. After what felt like an eternity, Jeremie emerged in his dark teal jacket and gray jeans.

Wasting no time, she quickly guided him through the deserted dorm halls, through Kadic’s park, into the sewers, and out at the Hermitage. He didn’t ask questions and she didn’t offer explanations; it would take too long, and it was something he *had* to see for himself.

They passed through the basement and finally reached the entrance to the secret room. Aelita gestured for Jeremie to go first.

When she crawled out behind him, a grin bloomed on her face; he’d found the hole in the wall, and what lay within. He was staring, mouth gaping. Aelita stepped up beside him and took her second look.

The new room was bigger than the first and illuminated by overhead neon lights. In the center was a scanner, similar to the ones at the abandoned factory. On a sign on the sliding door, an inscription was flashing: *Caution! Danger! Unsafe for those over 18 years of age!* There was no supercomputer that she could see, but there was a primitive control terminal.

Jeremie found his voice at last. “But, Aelita...this is...”

She nodded. “It’s like the place William, Ulrich, and Yumi found in Brussels.” Her voice was so excited, it came out as a squeal. She almost couldn’t speak. She’d wanted to see that city for herself, but there was no way she could, with the government crawling all over the location. Now, she might! “Hurry, get to the controls; I’m gonna take the scanner.”

The blonde adjusted his glasses. “No, you shouldn’t do that alone. We need to call the others. It could be dangerous. We need to...”
No. No, she couldn’t wait. Her father’s legacy was right there. She approached Jeremie and placed her hands on his shoulders. “I know it might be dangerous, but I can’t let that stop me. It’s my duty to enter the replica. My father hid this for me to find; he’d want me to enter. I called you because I need you at the controls; will you please help me?”

His face turned red. Jeremie was silent for a few heart-stopping moments; what would she do if he said no, Aelita wondered? She could try going in anyway, but she’d really have no idea what she was dealing or how to leave.

Relief flowed through her when his arms wrapped around her in a quick, brief hug. “Alright, Aelita. Leave it to me.”

---

She landed on her feet. Aelita looked down at herself; she was once again in her elfin appearance, with the pink spandex, white chestpiece, and clear skirt. Then she looked around. She was in a forest, but it wasn’t the same as Lyoko’s Forest Sector. This sky was a solid azure, with no gradients or shades; the ground was a simple extended green. Three of the trees around her were larger than the rest, with thick brown trunks.

“Is everything alright?” Jeremie asked, directly in her ear. So that’s just like Lyoko too.

“Yes,” she said. “Everything’s good.”

“Good. I was afraid, for a moment, with that inscription at the controls…”

“It was a warning for those over eighteen, though. I’m a minor, so everything should be fine. And I don’t think there are any monsters here. I don’t see the city…”

Disappointment welled up; she’d hoped to see her father’s ghost, or find some clues about Mr. X. Aelita brushed it aside. This was a new place to explore, with new possibilities. Not only was it her duty to do so, it was her joy.

The three trees had clearly been singled out, so Aelita approached them first. She studied them, then hesitantly took several steps to the one on her left. As she did, Jeremie announced, “A message just appeared on my screen. It says this tree is number one. There’s a date, 1985, and an inscription: end of Project Carthage.”

That’s what Daddy worked on! Lightly, she touched the trunk, and a long and narrow hole opened up. Without hesitation, Aelita strode into it.

Everything went white for a moment. When her vision returned, she was standing in a huge, deserted laboratory without windows. It was cluttered with metal tables, machines, big microscopes, and computers. A series of neon lights illuminated the room. And leaning over one of the tables, dressed in white lab coats…

Her heart lodged itself in her throat. “Mommy! Daddy!”

Aelita ran forth, arms opened for a hug--and passed right through them. No! Wheeling around, she desperately pawed at their forms again. It was no use; her fingers just phased through them. “Mommy, Daddy! Can you hear me?!”
“Calm down, Aelita! My screen’s covered with notes; whatever you’re seeing is just a simulation. A three-dimensional recording of something that happened long ago. Probably in 1985. Your parents aren’t real.”

Her fists balled. They were right there. So close she could have touched them. She should have been able to touch them. “It’s not fair!”

“I know,” Jeremie said gently. “But if your father wanted to show you something, you should pay attention and listen, don’t you think?”

She didn’t answer. She just stared at her parents, drinking in every detail: Mommy’s beautiful pink hair and clear blue eyes, the shape of Daddy’s hands as he twisted the knobs on a microscope. The way Mommy brushed an errant strand of hair behind her ear, the way Daddy straightened up and sighed. Mommy glanced over, and he gave her a slight smile. “I’m tired, Anthea”

“I know, dear.” Aelita wanted to cry at the sound of her mother’s voice. In her dreams, it was indistinct, more a sense of words being said than actually hearing them. Now she knew Mommy’s voice was musical and soft. “How far along are you?”

“It won’t be much longer; two months, maybe three, and then finally, Project Carthage will be functioning. We’ll have done it…it will be a great day for the entire world…”

A faint sadness swept across Mommy’s eyes. She bit her lip.

“My love, what’s wrong?”

“I found the documents we were looking for…it wasn’t easy.”

Daddy leaned forward, eyes alight with anticipation behind his glasses. “And?”

“Unfortunately, our doubts were well-founded. Carthage won’t save the world; in fact, it could help destroy it. Inside the First City, they inserted a dark zone we can’t control. It’ll transform Carthage into a weapon of mass destruction.”

Daddy swore and pounded a fist against the table. Immediately, the laboratory, he and his wife, and the whole virtual world dissolved around Aelita. She cried out, reaching for her parents--

The world reformed. She was now in a small and welcoming living room. Daddy was on the couch, his head in his hands. Mommy was next to him, rubbing soothing circles on his back. And on the floor, near the Christmas tree…

Aelita inhaled. It was her. A little girl of about four with short pink hair, playing with Mister Puck.

“The First City…” Jeremie mused, not paying attention to the scene before them. “How much do you want to bet that’s the name of the replica the others found?”

Before she could respond, a shout from Daddy dragged her attention back to her parents. “No! We sacrificed our whole lives for this project! Our daughter was born in a military base, and we’ve been cut off from the outside world for years. And all for what? To create a new weapon? I won’t allow it!”

“Speak more quietly, dear!” Mommy reprimanded. “The room may be under surveillance.”

“I couldn’t care less! So what if they hear? I built Carthage to make the world a better place, not drive it to its ruin! The electronic communications control should provide low-cost service to
everyone. It would be revolutionary for those in third-world countries or living in great difficulty! But those maniacs only want to take advantage of it as a weapon in their stupid war! Personally, I don’t care if a person is Russian or American! They’re still human beings! We’re all equal!”

“I know. I agree with you,” Mommy said calmly. “But what can we do? The project is so close to completion they can finish it without our help. And what about Aelita? If we expose ourselves, who will take care of her?”

In unison, the couple glanced at the little girl. The younger Aelita had stopped playing and was observing them with a worried look. “Mommy, Daddy, is everything alright?”

“Everything’s fine, dear,” Daddy said. “Go back to your game.”

Smiling, she returned to playing with her toy. For a long while, the couple remained quiet. Aelita watched them watch her.

Finally, Daddy murmured, “We can escape. I don’t know how yet, but we can do it. If we created Carthage when everyone thought it was impossible, we can do plenty of other things. We’ll destroy what we built. They’ll be left with nothing, and we’ll escape with our dear Aelita. But we’ll bring the fruits of all our years of sacrifice and labor with us, and we will find a way to continue to study elsewhere. We’ll give birth to a new Carthage.”

On the carpet, the little girl babbled, “No, Mister Puck, let’s go to Leeoco!”

Rising, Hopper went over and patted her head. “Lyoko? Yes, my dear! If we build a new Carthage, we could call it Lyoko. It’s a wonderful name!”

---

And then Aelita was back in front of the tree. “It’s over?”

“Almost!” Jeremie answered. “I just have to finish saving it. But there are still the other two trees. According to my computer, the next one covers the period of time from 1985 to 1988. It’s called A Life Incognito.”

Once again, Aelita touched the tree and passed through. She emerged in the courtyard of a military base. The sky was blanketed by gray clouds. The blockhouses of cement were covered in snow, and large searchlights swept the courtyard. In their passing light, Aelita could see walls and rolls of barbed wire surrounding the base. There were men stationed around, with large dogs on leashes. Despite the wind, helicopters lifted into the sky; a blaring siren provided the answer why.

Squinting, Aelita’s attention was drawn to a couple rushing towards a Jeep. The man was stocky, the woman slender, and both were wrapped in large, hooded military coats. Mommy and Daddy? Not wanting to lose sight of them even for a moment, she hurried after them.

It was then Aelita found she could climb inside the Jeep. Breathing thankfully, she slid into the backseat. The woman was at the steering wheel, throwing off her hood to reveal thick, brown, curly hair. Not Mommy.

The man was still hooded, face hidden. Peering up front, Aelita saw the woman had a vaguely familiar face. She scrunched her nose, trying to remember where she’d seen it before. “Professor
Schaeffer,” the woman said as she started the car. “Stay calm and let me handle this. They won’t stop us, you’ll see.”

Daddy nodded. Aelita glanced at him and gasped. He’d opened his coat, and inside it was a small, smiling, pink-haired girl. “Be sweet, Aelita,” he whispered. “No one must know you’re here, so don’t make any noise. Be on your best behavior and you’ll get an extra dessert, promise!”

The Jeep started up and crossed the courtyard. Aelita held her breath as it approached a checkpoint, where a metallic sentry box was protecting a double barrier. Obviously things had gone well in the end, but right then and there, she was totally sucked into the tension of the moment.

Two soldiers left the lookout post, wrapped in similar thick coats and guns over their shoulders. One pointed his at the Jeep, while the other headed to the drivers’ window. “Ah, Major Steinback. Good evening.”

“At ease, soldier. And open the barrier, I’m in a hurry!”

“Sorry Major, but the barrier won’t be opening tonight. There was a violation of the security code, and the Colonel—”

“The Colonel personally order me to leave the base on a mission of absolute priority!” Major Steinback snapped. “You see this man beside me? He’s not hiding his face for nothing! I have an ID that gives me full power here, and I can guarantee you that if this barrier doesn’t open in the next ten seconds, starting tomorrow, you will spend the rest of your life cleaning toilets from morning ‘til night!”

The soldier swallowed. “Yes, Major. I’ll open it right away.”

As the Jeep passed through the barrier, Daddy smiled. “Permission from the Colonel?”

“I have my connections, Professor, don’t worry,” Major Steinback murmured.

They raced down an icy road into the night. Aelita looked over her shoulder to watch the base shrinking in the distance. It had been at the top of a small hill bordered by birch trees; all around was solitary wilderness.

Daddy spoke, and she turned back around. “How could I not worry? Aelita and I are saved, but Anthea…”

“We’ll find her, Professor. You have my word. My contacts are already on the job. Soon, we’ll know just who took her and why, and we’ll get her back. For now, what matters is that you’ve escaped with the documents.”

“Not all of them.”

“We took or destroyed what we could of the most important ones. That’s still a victory. I was called The Relentless, remember? I don’t have the right to make a mistake…”

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Suddenly, Aelita fell out of the back seat and landed on an embankment. Now she was in the yard
of a simple cottage, surrounded by other similar houses. The sun was shining, and below them a valley was spread out. They were in the mountains. Her head spun from the change in scenery.

Daddy was climbing up to house’s porch. He was wearing a suit and tie, and had a leather briefcase in one hand. As he extracted his keys, a car pulled over in the yard. A woman stepped out—Major Steinback. She was in her military outfit and wore her ranks on her shoulder.

“Ah, Major,” Daddy smiled, opening the door. “Allow me...after you.”

“Thank you. We can talk in peace in there.”

Aelita followed them in. There was barely any furniture around, and what was there was old-fashioned. The house seemed more like a place you laid your head rather than a place you lived.

The major settled on the couch as Daddy went to prepare some coffee. “How is the little one doing?”

“She’s doing well. I’ve hired a great babysitter for her while I’m at work. I’m not quite sure whether I’ll let her attend school or homeschool her, though. She needs to be around other kids, and she’s certainly old enough to keep her mouth shut, but…”

“Well, if you do, you can’t do it here. I’m sorry, Professor. You’ll need to move again in less than a month.”

“That’s a shame,” Daddy sighed. “I was getting used to being Henri Zopfi…”

“We’ll give you a new identity and another place to work, don’t worry.”

“Again…”

“Don’t worry, this one should be more permanent.”

Daddy returned and passed the major a cup of coffee. She took it and drank deeply, closing her eyes with relish. “But that’s not the only reason I’m here.”

“You found Anthea?” Daddy gasped, his eyes glimmering with hope.

“Unfortunately, not yet. But we finished our research and we know who took her: a soldier who left at the same time she disappeared.”

“I want to see his file.”

“I figured as much, so I brought it for you,” Major Steinback said, smiling wryly. “But Professor, don’t do anything stupid. Let me work on the investigation.”

Pulling out a manilla folder from her coat, she continued, “His name is Mark James Hollenback. He’s twenty-one years old. He entered the army at sixteen, and he worked at the base of the project for a year. We don’t know why he decided to do such a stupid thing yet, but my contacts and I are on his trail.”

Aelita carved the name into her memory. Hollenback. Mark James Hollenback. He was the one who’d taken her mother…

Then everything dissolved again.
She found herself standing in front of the Hermitage. The sky was a cloudy gray and the trees shook from a fierce wind she could, surprisingly, feel. On the door of the house, someone had attached a sign saying sold. A small van had just pulled up front, and her younger self climbed out. She looked about six years of age.

“Are we here, Daddy?” she asked.

“Yes!”

Daddy climbed out of the passenger’s side of the van, while Major Steinback exited from the driver’s seat. This time she was wearing civilian clothes: a red shirt and a pair of jeans. “That’s right, this is the place!” she said in a cheerful voice. “If all goes well, Franz Hopper and his young daughter, Aelita Hopper, should be staying here for quite some time.”

Her younger self gasped. “You mean we won’t have to move again?”

Daddy kissed her forehead. “Not for a long time, if ever. This should be our home for many years. So why don’t you familiarize yourself with it while Mademoiselle Steinback and I unpack?”

“Okay!”

Her younger self darted off to explore, while the two adults began to unload the boxes in the van. They chatted and smiled and traded jokes; it warmed Aelita’s heart to see them being less formal with each other. By now, it must have been at least two or three years since their escape from their military base. She was glad her father had a reliable friend.

“I’ll also be working with you at Kadic, under a fake name,” Major Steinback mentioned, as they worked. “That way I can watch over you.”

“Hopefully I won’t need another rescue!”

The pair laughed. Aelita’s smile grew sad. If only Daddy knew…

When Daddy spoke again, it was in a grave tone. “But what interests me the most is getting back to my research as quickly as possible, and finding Anthea.”

“I’ve already made contact with a local manufacturer,” his friend assured him. “He possesses a factory not far from here. We can reconstruct the underground level and transform it into a laboratory. The owner will give us his response in a bit, but he seemed very interested by our research.”

“And Hollenback?”

“Unfortunately, I haven’t gotten any more news about him for some time now. What I know is that he changed his name and is the head of a criminal organization. He’s covered his tracks quite well…we thought he was an idiot, but he’s actually quite intelligent. He fooled us so completely, we’ve given him the name ‘the Magician’.”

Daddy placed a crate on the ground and rubbed his shoulders. Then, he pulled a pendant out from under his sweater and showed it to Major Steinback. Aelita’s hand rose to clutch her own and grabbed empty air. Right. It wasn’t here with her. “Anthea is alive and doing well,” Daddy said
firmly. “That’s what this pendant tells me. So, I will continue to look for her, day and night, until I find her.”

Major Steinback rested a hand on his shoulder. “I’ll always be here to help you. Anthea was my best friend, and I swore to bring her back to you and your daughter...no matter what.”

--

Once again, Aelita found herself in front of the trio of trees. Her head was spinning from all these new revelations about her father’s past. So much she hadn’t known—or had forgotten. What else lay within? Eagerly, she stepped towards the final tree. “What’s this one say?”

Jeremie yawned when he answered. “Hmm...it’s not clear. It’s written that we’ll access a new, longer level. And there’s a note: enter only when your heart is ready.”

Aelita pumped her fists. “I’m super ready! Let’s go!”

“Whoa, hold on,” Jeremie said with another yawn. “It’s five in the morning, we’ve got school, and you’ve already gotten a lot of surprises tonight. The Replika won’t run away. I think it’d be better to come back with the others when we’re more rested. You haven’t run into any monsters so far, but we don’t know what could be hiding on the new level.”

His yawns were contagious. Against her will, Aelita felt them spread to her. As if that were a trigger, an overwhelming sleepiness fell upon her. Her eyes wanted to close, her body to curl up somewhere warm. She might make it through the day with a two-hour nap, but without it, her Monday would be too long. “I guess you’re right...” she said reluctantly.

“Perfect! Then get ready, because… Materialization!”
In his penthouse suite, Hannibal Mago was surveying a party from a second-floor balcony. A giant diamond chandelier hung from the ceiling. Servers moved about the white carpeted floors like water, carrying trays with alcoholic beverages and hors d’oeuvres. Guests lounged on lush purple couches and armchairs. On the western side was a pool table, as well as shining mahogany tables where games of blackjack and poker were in progress. On the eastern side, there was a door leading to a hallway, where far more lecherous activities were going on. And directly across from Hannibal, on the southern side, the floor-to-ceiling window showed the city of Tokyo. This late at night, its lights looked like a sparkling crown, something for him to reach and pluck and pocket if he only had the power.

His fingers tightened around the flute of his wine glass. Soon.

He returned his attention to his two companions: a Russian with a large, round stomach, and a whip-thin Chinese man. The former went by Anatoly Kozlov, a crime lord who specialized in the rings of prostitution and drug trade. He had a jovial, friendly attitude that Hannibal genuinely liked. He was glad he hadn’t had to shoot the man.

The second man couldn’t have been more Kozlov’s opposite. His face was serious, and gambling was his choice of trade. Li, he called himself. While Kozlov was flirting with the women, Li was standing rigid-backed, routinely sweeping the floors for danger.

As for Hannibal...well, weapons and technology were his corners of the black market. Whores and casinos were lucrative enough, yes, but at the end of the day war and espionage were the best producers of money. And Hannibal had very expensive desires. This suite, this luxury, everything he had was well-deserved after the swill and shit he grew up with.

He, Kozlov and Li had been meeting to strike deals, of course; both wanted to purchase the tech that cloaked one from surveillance cameras. Hannibal wasn’t willing to let that go cheaply. Their debate had lasted some hours. Tempers had come close to breaking. Veiled threats had been made. But at the end of the day, it was Hannibal who triumphed, as he always did. And now, with business done, it was time for pleasure.

“Sir?”

Speaking of pleasure… He turned to see his assistant Hera climbing up the balcony steps. All her hair was gray, but her face was still free of lines. Even though she was in her late forties or earlier fifties—older than him—he had a fondness for calling her “my dear”. After all, she was a dear treasure. She was more than his assistant, she was one of his top R&D workers. Her help had lead to countless breakthroughs and new developments, which helped secure the Green Phoenix as one of the major players of the underworld.

Alas, she had never been able to deliver what he longed for the most: Project Carthage, or any of Hopper’s work. She was intelligent, but Hopper was on a completely different level, and his work
was locked up tighter than a miser’s purse.

He smiled. “Hera, my dear, what can I do for you?”

“Sorry to bother you, sir. But there’s an important call for you.”

“It can’t wait until the end of the party?”

“I’m afraid not, sir. It’s Agent Grigory. Very urgent.”

“Very well,” he sighed. He gave nods to his fellows, who were observing the exchange with thinly-veiled interest. “Gentlemen, if you’ll excuse me…”

Hannibal preferred to always wear a mask of civility and good nature. Fools would lower their guards before it, and the wise would be even more unsettled. Those here were wise; the crowds shied away so he could traverse easily. No one met Hannibal’s eyes or asked where he was going. They feared him, and he loved it.

He stepped into his bedroom, which had four guards by the doors. They saluted sharply upon seeing him. He nodded slightly, took hold of the doorknob—made of pure gold and embalmed with the image of a bird in flight—turned it, and stepped inside. Emerald greens and amethyst purples, with the occasional white, made up his room’s color palette. Priceless paintings hung on the walls, expensive vases stood on marble stands, and an antique grandfather clock watched a lavish bed. It was more akin to a museum than a bedroom—a veritable hoard of culture and treasure, just the sort of opulence he liked.

The only exception was a large, thin monitor on a large table in the center of the room. On it was the face of Grigory Nictapolus, frozen and awaiting his order to accept the conference call. Before he did, Hannibal pressed a certain button to activate his voice-masking program. “Ah, Grigory. I trust you wouldn’t call me over a trifling matter?”

The words were light, but the unspoken threat lurked beneath like a shark in the water.

“No, sir, I wouldn’t. The kids told some of their friends about the supercomputer, and last Saturday, I extracted certain memories from the Ishiyamas. With both those pieces of information, I triangulated an area where it should be. For the past three days, I’ve searched and conducted research within that area, and now I’ve pinpointed the supercomputer’s location.”

He inhaled sharply. Yes.

“The supercomputer is located in the underground of an abandoned factory on a small island in the center of the Seine. It’s connected to Kadic by a secret passage through the sewers. On the iron manhole to access the passage is the symbol of the Green Phoenix.”

Hannibal slammed the desk with his fist, both exultant and furious. “I knew it! That traitor Walter built it with our money! And this supercomputer, have you seen it? Is it activated?”

“I have, and no, sir, it isn’t. Do you want me to turn it on?”

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

He ended the call and rose, trembling with eagerness. He knew he would have to leave the party early. Kozlov and Li might take it as a slight, but let them. He had more important matters to deal with, and if he got his way, no one would ever dare stand against him again.
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ACT II END

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The city, though silent, was more watchful than slumbering. The spires pierced the blue sky like long, sharp nails. Gleaming windows suggested alert eyes, and every building was immaculately polished. A few tranquil ships drifted from place to place, but nobody was about. It was almost always empty in the city.

And then the boy appeared from nowhere.

One moment, there was nothing. The next, the air seemed to hum, condense, and he simply stepped out of it like he’d opened a door.

He flexed his fingers, then took off. His surroundings blurred by as he flew high, gathering speed. He didn’t fly in a straight line, but rather an arc. There was no end to the spires, but he flew until he was above every other building. And then, when his upwards trajectory reached its peak...he let himself fall.

He grinned and let out a whoop as the wind rushed around his ears. Exhilaration flooded his lungs. Buildings streaked by, too fast for the eye to discern. To him, this was a game—not of adrenaline, but of numbers, calculating trajectories and speeds and distances. The slightest error meant he wouldn’t have room to break off before he hit the ground.

At the last possible moment, he snapped up and alighted on one of the many expressways winding between the towers. The impact didn’t jar him or send pain through his legs; the surface had withdrawn and softened to accommodate him.

He began to run, fueled by eagerness. Aelita would be arriving soon. It was the best part of his day. They would venture through the city, and he might bring her to a music shop where she would make pianos and turntables sing, or to a park where they would devise and play infinite games, or to a cafe where they would discuss all kinds of things.

There was only one place in the city he wouldn’t bring her, and only because she wouldn’t go. The castle. She said it terrified her, and that she was terrified for him, living alone in its shadow.

He’d been puzzled and asked for clarification. She’d said that in the human world, the cities were congested with people, streets packed with bodies and roads alive with cars. Trying to imagine it, he didn’t think he’d like it. What use would he have for all those strangers? Here, he had himself, Aelita, the simple helper AIs, and the Professor. Who else did he need?
The thought of Professor Hopper made his stomach twist with mixed feelings, as always. The Professor created him, gave him purpose, gave him Aelita. The Professor was a genius with aspirations of changing the world, of ushering in peace. He trusted the boy to help him with that. His loyalty to the man should be absolute.

But the Professor didn’t care for him. Professor Hopper had told him before that he was just a program and shouldn’t waste energy assuming a human form. It confused the boy--and angered him.

And the scolding for experimenting with his abilities…

He scowled. Why shouldn’t he try pushing his gifts as far as they could go? Didn’t the Professor understand that only through strength could the world be changed? The Professor preached pacifism, but running hadn’t solved anything. His enemies still existed. They still hunted him--and his daughter, whom he claimed to love. The boy doubted whether the Professor did, because surely one could not love Aelita without wanting to destroy all who would harm her.

So then, how could he be absolutely loyal to a man who seemed so...ignorant?

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His travel through the city was uninterrupted, and took many forms--flying, running, even changing the angles of roads and skating. True, he could have just teleported to his destination, but he enjoyed basking in his achievements.

When he’d first been created, there were many rules in the city, set up by the Professor. At first he’d heeded them, but then he’d started questioning them. Some he could understand, like the rule restricting weapons to deter invaders. But what was the point in preventing him and Aelita from running on grass? Or not letting them fly as fast as they wanted?

So he set about learning the codes. No, not learning, studying. He examined them inside and out. And then he began tweaking the rules. Just a bit. Some harmless adjustments here, an overturn there.

He’d found he really enjoyed it. So he continued to hone these skills, fine-tuning them until he could hack with the precision of a laser. He’d even discovered, to his delight, that he could change the layout of the First City. That had made for a very entertaining game of ‘sneak up on Aelita’.

He wasn’t going to do anything malicious or stupid, like let Carthage out. He just wanted to make life a bit easier for himself and Aelita. He really didn’t understand why the Professor was so adamant about sticking to his rules.

Aelita tried explaining it was because Professor Hopper would someday like for more children to visit this place, and he had to make sure they didn’t get hurt. That just made the boy even more disdainful. Why would he want others to come here, to intrude upon his and Aelita’s space? To steal his only companion? What if she forgot about him?

He shook his head to chase such thoughts away. That would never happen, surely.

Enough reminiscing--he was here, at the Wall. Like the spires, the Wall rose endlessly into the sky. There were no markings or texture on its black surface; it may as well have been a void, and
this the edge of the world. It was an apt enough metaphor.

He lightly skimmed his fingers over it, and blue lighting arced across them. This was the edge of his world. The Wall was a repellant, completely encircling the city. He couldn’t pass through or over or under it, no matter how he tried. There was only one way in or out, a single gateway, and even that could be locked. Once it was, there was no way to open it from the inside.

But for now, there was no such lockdown in place. He landed near the gate. As he approached the doors, a floating panel appeared. He pressed his palm to it briefly; when he pulled it away, the imprint lingered a moment. Then his name appeared, spelled out in shining capital letters.

Smoothly, the doors swung open. Beyond the threshold, a long drawbridge vanished into the horizon line. It was suspended over nothing, for there was neither moat nor valley nor road beyond the city. Just the bridge and darkness.

He could cross the bridge, but he usually didn’t feel the desire. There wasn’t much he could do on the other side; there were certain encodings in his directives that restrained him. But perhaps someday, he’d grow strong enough to break them. Just the thought made a strange feeling flush through him, half-guilt, half-excitement. He’d once vowed to stop anyone who would take Aelita away; that was when this little, wonderful, traitorous wish was born.

I know I have power. In this city, I can do almost anything. But my strength is bound to this city. If I could bring it into the human world...nothing would ever stop me.

And Aelita would never have to be afraid again.

But that was all speculation. For now, he sat, pulled his legs up, and wrapped his arms around them. He fixed his eyes on the horizon, waiting for Aelita to appear.

She’s late today, he thought after some time had passed. That didn’t matter; he had all the time in the world to wait, and the city was still being cared for. Even now, other parts of him were checking that everything was well, correcting weaknesses in the defenses, and clearing out unnecessary junk. It took so little effort on his part that most of the time, he didn’t even notice he was doing it.

More time passed.

...She’s very late.

His chest tightened. He sent some of himself to the other side of the bridge to scan for Aelita. But she wasn’t there. The constriction grew tighter still. Had something happened to her? Not for the first time, he wished he could see what was happening in the human world. His surveillance was limited to the factory; all his knowledge of the human world came through Aelita. If something had befallen her out there, there was nothing he could do, and again he cursed his binds.

So he did the only thing he could. He waited, motionless, before that infinite bridge. Every so often, he thought he saw a dot of pink--her hair, her clothes--on the opposite end. It was always just a mirage, though.

Aelita wouldn’t visit anymore.

But he didn’t know that yet.
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**INTERLUDE END**

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Chapter End Notes

*A/N: In Ilo Tempore* is a Latin phrase meaning "at that time".
ACT III: The Return of the Phoenix

In Kadic’s park, Aelita, Belpois, and XANA as Eva were walking through the trees and slushy snow. The first two were deep in argument; the last was watching through lidded eyes. Aelita had been attempting to convince Belpois that they should return to the Hermitage to finish her exploration of the second secret room. It had already been a day, and she was growing impatient.

“Aelita, I promise we’ll go back soon. But first we need to be sure--”

“This is about my parents, Jeremie! My father is dead! I don’t have any idea where my mother is! That place gave me more information about her than I ever knew, and the rest of it could tell me even more! Why won’t you understand?!”

“I understand perfectly, Aelita. But I need to finish the final verifications. Tonight, we’ll meet in my room with everyone to discuss things, and then we’ll enter the final level of the Replika. It’s not as simple as you’d like to believe. You need to be more patient…”

Before Aelita could throw back a rebuttal, Belpois walked away, hands in pockets and shoulders hunched up against the cold. Robbed of her opponent, the pink-haired girl angrily kicked at a lump of snow. “Why is he so stubborn?!?”

There were many reasons XANA could have offered, all likely to earn suspicion. Jeremie Belpois is a two-bit programmer trying to play sorcerer’s apprentice, Jeremie Belpois thinks he’s better than he is, Jeremie Belpois is overconfident in his self-righteousness.

He stayed silent. Apparently Aelita didn’t really want an answer, for after a moment she sighed and turned to Eva. She forced a smile. “Do you want to continue walking together?”

Some sort of glitch happened then. His vessel’s heart started malfunctioning. And before he could even run calculations as to the benefits of accepting her offer, he found himself replying “Sure.”

As they resumed walking, XANA fumed. Why had he accepted the walk before knowing he could get something out of it? No, a better question was, why hadn’t he attacked Aelita the moment Belpois was out of sight? Why hadn’t he given her the dark kiss that would allow him to take over her body? They were alone. It was the perfect opportunity. So why this…

Reluctance?

Incredulous, he analyzed that feeling again. Yes, that was it. Reluctance. He didn’t want to do that.
Not to Aelita. Moreso, when she’d asked Eva, and by extension him, to continue the walk...he’d felt some kind of strange warmth. That must have been the source of the bug.

This was beyond infuriating. Respect? Fine. He could accept that. She was a dangerous opponent. But first the strange sympathy, then reluctance, and now this? No. Even if she was his favorite, this was blatantly unacceptable. How was he supposed to--

Stop, he told himself. \( 56,780 \times 75,678 = 4,296,996,840 \).

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

Now, to identify and correct the source of the error.

After a quick self-diagnostic, Eva’s eye twitched. The problem was, the error originated from within that mental safe. A safe that was proving itself faulty. No matter how much he reinforced the barriers, they still rattled. What he’d imprisoned inside did not want to stay there.

And even worse, a small part of him wanted to let it out.

**Destroying something would be very cathartic right now.**

“Is everything alright?”

He started and looked at Aelita. He’d been too distracted and too distant, and she’d noticed. He scrambled to answer. “Yes, yes...I was just thinking about what Jeremie said. It’s really not fair of him to be so inconsiderate of you.”

“I know,” Aelita sighed, and took Eva’s hand. “Thanks for understanding.”

He suddenly realized his vessel’s fingers were covered in sweat and jumped. Disgusting human emotions! Why was he having such trouble controlling them?! Was it because this method of possession was different? Combined with that infernal safe, the effect on him was--

**STOP. Stay focused.** Inside his vessel, he forced himself to take a deep breath and close his eyes. Then he realized that was a human way of calming, inwardly cursed, and began reciting complicated math problems again.

Yes. There was the calm he sought. The clarity, the purpose. He would wait and find a way to enter the Replika in the Hermitage with these stupid kids. He would find Hopper’s secrets and finally return to Lyoko. And then this farce would end. He would no longer be a ridiculous cross between a human and a computer. He would be rid of this faulty vessel and this infuriating girl who kept prompting such unwelcome emotions. He would find a way to purge the contents of that safe once and for all. And he would once again be the indisputable lord of the virtual world and future master of the real world.

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“Don’t you think it’s weird?”

William glanced up from his history textbook. “What’s weird?”

Yumi, Ulrich, and William were studying in the library. Or, well, she and Ulrich were studying,
and they’d allowed him to study at their table. She was still wary about William, but he had impressed her in Brussels by drawing the men in black away. So she felt he deserved a little slack.

“Odd and Eva.” Yumi pressed. “They’ve started acting like they share some secret. One will begin a sentence and the other will finish it, like they knew what they were thinking.”

Ulrich shrugged. “They like each other, and Odd seems serious for once. It’s kinda romantic, being able to read your SO that well.”

He gave her a meaningful glance. And okay, that made Yumi’s heart stutter a bit. A dumb little smile spread without her consent. Ulrich was her constant in this, quiet, solid, loving. He was able to tell whenever she was brooding or needed support. He’d gone with her to check on her parents and helped her bring them back from the hospital.

*He’s grown up so much from that jealous boy. I’m lucky to have him.*

“Besides,” William added. “It’s kinda obvious you don’t like Eva. Couldn’t you just be reading too much into nothing?”

The warmth faded, and she scowled. Yumi wasn’t blind to her flaws. She knew she could be judgmental. But it wasn’t just that Eva gave her a bad feeling, it was that her behavior was off. When they’d walked back together that one night, the girl had kept up a steady stream of chatter, plowing over any questions Yumi asked. She spoke in perfect French, like it was her native language—and yet she came from California, which as far as Yumi knew, didn’t have a large French community. There were times she would take a second longer to laugh, like she was pretending to feel instead of really feeling. And no person smiled *all the damn time.*

All of it was stuff her friends would dismiss, and even Yumi had to admit it wasn’t concrete evidence. For all she knew it Eva really was just that strange.

But still.

“Hey, guys!”

“Speak of the devil,” Ulrich remarked as Odd dropped into a chair, straddling the back. “Odd, what’s up?”

“What’s up? Haven’t you heard? Jeremie wants all of us to meet up together in his room tonight!”

She frowned and checked her phone; no new messages. No, wait--one just popped up. Jeremie texted like he was actually talking, all proper punctuation and capitalization: *We’re having a meeting in my room tonight at 7 pm. Be discreet.*

Her mouth puckered. *But how did Odd know before Jeremie sent this?*

When she asked that, Odd waved it off. “Oh, he told Eva and Aelita, and Eva told me.”

Yumi gave the other two boys a look that said *see?*

With a raised eyebrow, Ulrich sent her a silent *what’s so strange them talking?

Her eyes narrowed. *Doesn’t he seem to know too quickly?*

“Cut it out,” William interrupted. Yumi tensed, listening for strands of jealousy, but all she heard was exasperation. “I have no idea what you two are saying.”
“Nothing important,” she muttered, a bit stung that Ulrich didn’t seem to believe her.

“Does Richard know?” her boyfriend asked.

“I’m sure Einstein’s found a way to tell him. The real question is—”

Suddenly, Odd stopped. His head turned. He stared very intently at a row of bookshelves for a few seconds. “Sissi, come out and quit recording.”

Chairs scraped as all the teens leapt to their feet. Seconds passed. Then finally, a familiar face poked out from behind the shelf Odd had been looking at. Sissi emerged, staring at their group with an unreadable expression. A tape recorder was in one hand.

Later, Yumi would be ashamed about her behavior. But her first thought was great, she’s stirring up trouble again. Her first words were an angry, “Why are you spying on us? Are you planning to blackmail us again?”

Sissi recoiled. “No,” she said after a moment, and even Yumi could hear the hurt in her voice. “But you are hiding something, and I want to help, and I don’t know why you won’t tell me. I thought...I don’t know.”

Guilt strangled her as Ulrich attempted, “Sissi, there’s nothing going on, really—”

Her eyes flashed. “Oh, just quit it! You think I haven’t noticed? Skulking, whispering, asking me for strange favors? Something is going on. You’ve told Eva--the new girl--but not me? And you!”

She turned on William suddenly, spitting the words. “I can’t believe you! I thought we were a team! But no, you’ve ditched me like the rest of them!”

William looked as if she’d struck him. In the stunned silence that followed, Sissi started to stomp off. Odd stepped in front of her. “The recorder?” he asked coldly.

Yumi gaped at his insensitivity. Sissi practically threw it at Odd, then shoved past him.

As she sprinted away, William threw on his jacket and ran after her.

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“Sissi, wait!” he yelled as he caught up to her outside the library.

“Go away, Dunbar!”

The sound of his surname made him flinch. It wasn’t said in a teasing tone. It was spat out like it was poison.

She picked up stride, and so did he. With his longer legs, he chased her down easily. He grabbed her arm and wheeled her around. To his horror, William saw there were tears in her eyes. “Sissi...I didn’t mean—”

She swiped a hand across her face, furious. “No! Don’t you dare pretend to care or apologize. Not after this! Not after days of--of avoiding me!”
“I...I know I messed up. I’m sorry. I just...didn’t know what to do.” He’d been told he couldn’t tell her anything about what the Lyoko Warriors were really up to. But he also knew she would want to ask questions about what he’d learned. What was he supposed to do? Lie? Feign ignorance? What about when she wanted to keep investigating, and he had to choose between helping her or keeping her away?

So he took the coward’s way out. He ran, hoping the Lyoko Warriors would agree to let her in before he was forced to a confrontation.

“I think it’s easy, don’t you? Just answer your phone when I call, or say ‘hi, Sissi’ in the halls, or hang out with me! Don’t just pretend I don’t exist! Don’t keep me out of the loop!”

“I know,” he said. “You’re right, and I’m sorry. I want to fix this.”

Her voice became pleading. “Then tell me. Tell me what’s going on, please. I want to help. I don’t want to be left behind anymore.”

*Out of all the things she could have asked for...* “Sissi, I...” He ran a hand through his hair. His heart felt like it was in a vice grip. “I can’t betray them again.”

The anger drained from her face. William immediately wanted it back. This new expression—Sissi looked cold-eyed, dead. It wasn’t *right.* “So that’s it, huh,” she said in a soft, numb voice.

“Sissi--”

“You got what you wanted. You’re ‘in’ again, and I’m still ‘out’. Here I thought you understood me.” She laughed hollowly.

“Sissi, that’s not --”

The slap left him stunned. He raised a hand to his stinging cheek. It was warm, starkly so against the outdoor chill. William stared at her, baffled.

“Just leave me alone! You have plenty of practice already!”

Daggers flew into his chest. She ripped her arm out of his grasp and tore across the school. There were *definite* tears streaking down her face now. He took a few steps after her, then stopped, his hand falling. There was no point. He didn’t know how to make it better.

He looked around. Some bypassers were staring, and William knew there would be new rumors before the hour was over. He glared at them. “What? What are you all looking at?”

They scattered, but it brought him no warmth.

---

It was a struggle to fit seven teenagers and an adult man in Jeremie’s room, especially since they had to smuggle Richard in. He looked awkwardly out of place among the group, too tall and lanky. They were brushing shoulders and filling every bit of available space.

Navigating through the sea of legs and vulnerable fingers, Jeremie managed to get to his closet and extract a poster he’d made earlier. With Aelita’s help, he stuck it to the wall with scotch tape.
“That seems complex,” Richard commented.

Jeremie snorted. Complex? Hardly. He’d written down four key points and connected them with a sequential algorithm. The real struggle had been making everything clear for everyone else! But it seemed his efforts had gone unnoticed, because most of them were looking perplexed too—or, in William’s case, staring at the ground with an empty expression.

Jeremie sighed. “Alright, I’ll explain it.”

“Excellent idea,” Yumi teased.

Ignoring her, he pointed out each of the words on the poster:

1. **Dossier**
2. **First City**
3. **Mirror**
4. **Richard Dupuis**

Then, grabbing a marker, he highlighted the first number. “I’ve tried to organize everything we’ve found by now. I’m convinced we’re following a series of tracks left by Franz Hopper, and we should assemble them like the pieces of a puzzle. In first place, his dossier with a series of Hoppix codes. I still haven’t understood what they’re for, but the other thing we found was…”

He stopped and highlighted the second number. “Number two: a replica that contained a rough copy of a virtual world I’ve called the First City.”

“What a great use of imagination,” Ulrich snickered.

Jeremie was unimpressed. “Laugh if you want, but if my hypothesis is correct, that’s the name Hopper used for it too. He certainly mentioned something called by that name in his journal, so for the time being that’s what we’ll go with.”

He continued, “Ulrich and William entered the First City using the scanner they found in Brussels, but didn’t get much chance to explore because the men in black appeared and chased them. Next comes number three, the Replika Aelita found in the Hermitage. Since it’s a journal that reflected upon several moments in Hopper’s life, I’ve called it the Mirror. Everyone agreed?”

General nods bobbed around the room, including William. At the sound of his name, he had finally tuned in. Jeremie approved. He wasn’t sure what was eating the dark-haired boy, but they needed to focus on the mission.

“Okay, and that leads us to number four: the codes on Richard’s palm-computer. Every line starts with the word **AELITA**, but the rest of the code is written in Hoppix. We don’t know what they do…I don’t even know if they’re a complete program or only a fragment of some more complex piece of software. But I’d bet either way, the code has something to do with Lyoko.”

He stopped to catch his breath and evaluate the room. People still seemed with him. Good. He traced the marker over a line going from points two to three, the First City to the Mirror. “When Aelita showed me the second secret room of the Hermitage, I suspected something right away. And this is the reason I prevented her from entering the second level of the journal yesterday: I wanted to confirm my idea. To explain it briefly, there’s a scanner providing access to the Mirror below the Hermitage, but no supercomputer.”

Aelita frowned. “What are you saying? The journal’s a virtual reality generated by a computer, so there must be a supercomputer!”
“Yes, but it’s not at the Hermitage; there’s just a simple terminal there. And from what Ulrich, Yumi, and William described, I don’t think there was a supercomputer at Brussels either. And may I remind you, we’re speaking of a machine so complex and large it occupied an entire floor of the factory. It’s impossible to just hide.”

William leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees. His eyes sparked with a bit more alertness and interest. “So what are you saying?”

Jeremie raised a pointer finger. “The First City and the Mirror are only sandboxes. Sometimes, programmers introduce a sort of operational core to computers completely separate from the rest. It’s a protected space where any such experiments cannot damage the rest of the system—precisely like the sandboxes children play in at parks! So—”

He stopped. Other than Aelita, Eva and—surprisingly—Odd, everyone’s eyes had glazed over. Jeremie sighed. “In French, it’s like constructing a computer first and adding a smaller one.”

“Ah”s and “oh, ok”s floated around. He resisted the urge to shake his head. Really, it wasn’t so hard to understand.

“So,” Jeremie continued, “That’s basically what Hopper did. Inside the factory’s supercomputer, he created two sandboxes: the First City and the Mirror. The scanners at the Hermitage and the primitive materials at Brussels do nothing more than connect to the supercomputer at the factory thanks to a high-security wireless network, which then accesses these two cores—”

“Stop,” Ulrich moaned. “You’re giving me a headache.”

“I get it,” Odd said.

Jeremie stared at him. Ulrich stared at him. Everyone barring Eva and Richard stared at him. That...was not what I was expecting. Odd was, to put it gently, a total idiot with technology. For him to follow Jeremie’s terminology was...had he fallen into a parallel universe or something?

Eva cleared her throat. “You were saying, Jeremie?”

“Right,” he mumbled, pushing Odd’s...oddness out of his mind. “We would have shut down the supercomputer convinced we deactivated it forever. But in reality, we didn’t realize there was a hidden protection system that continued to supply energy to two sectors of the computer. Those being, of course, the cores of the First City and the Mirror. And if you ask me, Hopper wanted us to find them.”

“To tell us...what?” Yumi asked.

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

They all smiled, and Jeremie relaxed.

---

At 10 PM, Dido was stepping out of another debriefing session. And that wasn’t even the last of
them; there was another meeting in just two hours. As soon as she got Agent W’s number, work had exploded in her face, and she hadn’t had a chance to contact him or even breathe until now. It was four in the morning in France, but that was fine. She didn’t believe in waiting for a ‘better time’, and neither should her agents. Especially not now that she had new information about the situation in Paris.

With swift, sure strides, she returned to her office, giving curt nods to her superiors and ignoring everyone else. She entered, closed the door, and made a beeline to her desk. Scooping up her phone, she pressed the button to active the anti-listening device, then entered Agent W’s number.

The phone rang for quite some time. But finally, a groggy, grumpy voice answered. “Hello…?”

“Hello, Agent W.”

The man was silent, but she knew he had snapped to attention. “Agent Dido…?” he said hesitantly after several seconds.

“Yes, that’s right. I have instructions for you. A car is coming to collect you shortly. Be ready.”

“Wait a moment!” She heard the rustling of bedsheets, bare feet on the floor--he was walking away from his bed, and his hopefully still-sleeping wife. “I can’t--”

“A trusted source,” she continued over his protests, “revealed to us that Hannibal Mago is headed that way. It surely has something to do with Hopper. I want you at the airport when Mago arrives so you can track him.”

“Ma’am, you can’t expect me to do that!” A door opened, closed. “I’m not qualified. I don’t remember anything.”

“You know what’s important. You know you’ve done very bad things, and you don’t want your wife or son to know. And that’s why you’re going to do as I say. Unless you would prefer to go to jail?”

His voice was tight with anger. “No, ma’am. But I thought our arrangement was just a one-time thing. I wasn’t aware you would hold my past over me forever.”

She decided to take a little pity on the man. A little. “I didn’t plan to. But that story, unfinished for so long, has been reopened. You were a key player then, and you will be again. The men who will get you are agents of mine, and will tell you how to get in contact with me. Do a good job, and this will be the last time we ever speak to each other.”

She hung up, waited a moment, and dialed a new number.

“Agent Lone Wolf at your orders.”

“Go collect Agent W. I have a mission for you.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Tacenda in Latin roughly translates to "something secret", "forbidden", or "taboo".
Aelita’s stomach fizzled with anticipation all night, keeping her awake longer than she should have been. The next day was no different; more than one teacher called her out in class for not paying attention. She couldn’t help it; her mind was flying with all kinds of colorful ideas about what she’d find in the Mirror. Was there more information about Mommy? The men who’d taken her? What about Mr. X? What if he was there, or clues about him?

By the time she and her friends sat down for lunch, she was staring at every clock she could, willing it to go faster. And it was because of her constant glances towards the cafeteria’s clock that she caught the swish of long, black hair passing by.

“Sissi!” she called, waving. “Over here!”

But instead of joining them like she expected, Sissi turned her head away and kept walking. Aelita frowned. What was that about?

Now that she thought about it, Sissi hadn’t sat with them at breakfast either. She glanced around the table. Jeremie, Odd and Eva seemed normal, but Ulrich and Yumi were just picking at their food. William was staring after Sissi, his face a mixture of guilt and hopelessness. Why didn’t I notice this sooner?

“Did something happen between you guys and Sissi?”

“Oh yeah, they all had a big fight,” Eva said. “Odd told me all about it.”

Jeremie glanced up from his plate. “What exactly happened?”

Yumi brushed a strand of hair behind her ear and didn’t answer. William’s gaze dropped, his shoulders slumping. Ulrich sighed, put his fork down, and said, “Odd came to tell us about the meeting for yesterday, but he found her spying on us. It started an argument.”

“Yeah, she knew something was up,” Eva said. “She was really upset about being excluded, especially when Yumi jumped down her throat.”

“Excuse me?” Yumi bristled.

Oh no.

“Whoa, let’s not--” William started.

Yumi walked right over him, giving Eva a glare that could have frozen steel. “You have no idea what you’re talking about! I bet Odd didn’t tell you that he’s the insensitive dolt who--”

“Hey, don’t blame me for making sure the group stays safe --”

“Why don’t you let William talk , Yumi--”

“Enough!” Aelita and Jeremie yelled at the same time, drawing attention from the nearby tables.
Waiting until the other students had looked away, Aelita said, “It doesn’t matter whose fault it was. We should be kinder to Sissi—and each other.”

At first, the two girls didn’t break eye contact. Then Eva turned away and smiled angelically. “You’re right, Aelita. I’m sorry, Yumi.”

Yumi stared hard and long at the other girl. “It’s fine.”

It didn’t sound fine. Her words and had been ground out, and her knuckles were white around her fork.

William groaned and threw his utensils down. “Look, are we really sure we can’t tell her? It’s really eating at her. She feels...unwanted.”

Aelita’s heart squeezed. Oh...poor Sissi...

“It’s for the best,” Jeremie insisted. “We have too much going on right now to catch Sissi up to speed. If we never tell her, she’ll eventually forget about this, and if we do, she’ll understand.”

William shook his head. Picking up his fork again, he stabbed at his chicken more forcefully than he had to. He cut a bite, brought it to his mouth, put it down. “Never mind,” he muttered. “I’m done.”

He shoved himself away from the table and left. Aelita watched him go. Glanced at the others. Opened her mouth to say something. Closed it.

The rest of lunch was filled with silence.

---

“You th/should take a real code name,” said the man seated on his left. Besides his horrid lisp, he had a long face and wild brown hair. Uncharitably, Walter thought he looked a lot like the rodent he went by.

“Totally,” said the one on the opposite side. He was the stereotypical American, with tan skin, long blonde hair, and a stupidly big grin. “I’m Marten, he’s Ferret, and our boss is Lone Wolf. Usually they bring Weasel, but his ribs are still healing. I’m so excited, I don’t get to go into the field much--hey, what do you think about Eagle, you look like an Eagle--”

“I’m Walter,” he interrupted stiffly. “Or as you so quaintly call me, Agent W. I certainly won’t be addressed as some animal.”

He already felt ridiculous enough. Like Dido had promised, these men picked him up in a sedan. They’d given him new clothes: a black suit, a black tie, a black trenchcoat, and a black pair of sunglasses. He couldn’t imagine this was considered inconspicuous. Anyone would notice they were secret agents because they were dressed like them.

On his hip, the weight of the pistol they’d pressed into his hands seemed to be a hundred tons. He had no idea how to use it. He was an adult, a grown man, playing make-believe and dress-up. It was ridiculous. And yet, these people took the idea of him doing this...this secret agent business seriously.
Once this lot collected him, Lone Wolf had driven to the Parisian region airport and traded several words with some police officers. He’d shown some notebooks and authorizations, and then they were going through the gate into the zone reserved for planes. Now there were parked behind a hangar, binoculars in one hand and the other resting on their guns.

He rubbed his eyes. It was three in the afternoon, and they’d been here for hours. The sky was completely clear, and the sunshine bounced off the snow that hadn’t been cleared by the airport employees. His sole meal had come when Ferret and Marten left to buy some sandwiches. His felt like a boulder in his stomach.

“How much longer is this going to take?” he asked.

“As long as it needs to,” Lone Wolf said curtly. The last of the agents was massive, rippling with muscles. He had short black hair and a hooked nose.

They were skulking near the last hangar in Sector F. These runways were meant for private plans owned by the rich. There were already several parked, casting great shadows on the tarmac. It provided decent cover close to the airport, but the fields on the horizon, where the plans touched down, were open to the skies.

And of course, spotting Mago’s plan by sight would be practically impossible. So they used a frequency scanner to listen for transmissions between the police and the airport’s control tower. This way, they could hear the operators speak to pilots and monitor the arrivals. For hours, that had been the only music in this car. Walter didn’t even like music and he would have rather listened to that than the drone of--

He and the others suddenly straightened as the next message came in.

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

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

His stomach dropped to his feet. This is really happening. Oh, no…

“Let’s move,” Lone Wolf said briskly. Walter’s hands shook.

They moved out of the sedan, climbing into a forgotten luggage car not too far away. Lone Wolf took the wheel. As they crept closer, keeping in the shadows cast by the planes and buildings, Walter spotted a flash of red. Using his binoculars, he zoomed in on the flash. There was a red, beaten pick-up truck entering the runway. It was driven by thin-faced man, and riding in the backseat were two enormous Rottweilers.

“Grigory Nictapolus,” Marten whispered, following his gaze. The excitement was all gone from his face now.

“That’s right. Thingth are getting theriouth .”

Walter was expecting Phoenix-1 to be an elegant private jet or a luxurious helicopter, but he couldn’t have been more wrong. When he peered up, what he saw descending from the sky, like a harbinger of death, was an enormous military plane.

The hairs on his arms rose, and not just from the cold. “Holy…”

“A C-17 Globemaster,” said Lone Wolf, also looking through his binoculars. “That nasty thing can carry up to one hundred or so passengers and seventy-seven tons of cargo. Mago brought an army.”
Fear, horror and self-preservation froze Walter to his spot. He did not want to imagine what would happen if a single one of those men caught sight of them. Or those dogs--he’d never been more grateful the wind was blowing towards him, instead of the other way around. The pistol, which had seemed awkward before, suddenly didn’t seem like enough protection.

They watched the plane land and a long line of men and vehicles disembark. There were five trucks, three carrying crates and equipment, two transporting troops. The soldiers wore camouflage uniforms and either helmets or gas masks. The sunlight gleamed off the semi-automatic pistols at their side.

“This is crazy,” Walter whispered. “There’s no way they can move all that through the city. They look like they’re planning an invasion!”

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

“There he is,” Marten hissed, pointing.

Walter peered through the binoculars again. A final vehicle was descending from the plane, a white Jeep with an open roof. It was driven by a striking, middle-aged woman with long gray hair, and at her side was a slightly younger man. His face was partially hidden by a wide-brimmed purple hat, he was dressed in a purple suit and tie, and dozens of rings glittered on his fingers. He looked like a gangster from a movie, Walter thought stupidly.

Nictapolus’s pickup approached the Jeep and the man stepped out, closely followed by those hellish dogs. He and Mago exchanged nods. For several moments, the two men just conversed, all while the deployment carried on.

Then Lone Wolf jerked back like he’d seen a snake. “Get back to the car. They’re starting to move again.”

Like terrified roaches, they scuttled around the perimeters of the airport to the sedan. Walter couldn’t get inside fast enough, practically leaping into the front with Lone Wolf. He was sweating like it was the middle of July instead of January. I don’t deserve this. I know I’ve done wrong, but this is too much!

From a distance that did not seem at all safe, they watched the line of cars and men move away, towards the airport’s exit. The few employees around kept their heads low and didn’t dare meet any of their gazes.

“Where are they going?”

“I have no idea,” Lone Wolf admitted. “The only one who knew anything about them was you, and you lost your memory over a decade ago. Is there anything you can recall? Anything at all?”

He concentrated, he really did. But all he got was the image of a gloomy chalet, a forest, and a name. “Some place called...the...Hermitage? That’s all.”

“Didn’t the report th th ay that wath Hopper’th place?” Ferret murmured to Marten.

“It is,” Lone Wolf confirmed, glancing at him. “We turned it inside out, but we never found anything. Still, Hopper was wily. I don’t doubt we missed something.”

“You did,” Walter said suddenly, certainty squeezing him. He knew he’d been there before, talked with Hopper, been shown...something. “I don’t remember what, but I know Hopper had some kind
of secret there.”

Marten slapped him on the back. He stiffened. “See? Dido was right to bring you in!”

Lone Wolf nodded thoughtfully. “Alright, here’s what we’re going to do. My men and I will follow Mago and see where he goes, what he’s planning. You take the car and go to the Hermitage to secure the perimeter. Cut the electricity and wires, and check the house. It’s probably still abandoned, but there might be looters. If so, neutralize them. And then call me for your next orders. If I don’t respond, get in contact with Dido right away and tell her we have a problem.”

Sweat beaded on his forehead. *Looters? Neutralize them?! I’m a civilian! A businessman! You can’t honestly expect this of me!*

But if he wanted this noose loosened from his neck, he had no choice but to obey.

“Understood,” he said quietly.

---

By the end of the day, the argument from lunch was mostly forgotten. They had a long dispute on the teams as they walked through the snowy forest to the Hermitage. It was decided that Odd, William, and Aelita were going into the Mirror; Aelita was a given, and Odd had been very adamant. With Odd going, William felt pressured to go to, so he could “show you I’m trustworthy”, in his words. Ulrich and Yumi had agreed to stay behind to protect Jeremie, in case the man with the dogs tried to attack. Richard was outside as lookout, hiding in the bushes.

Once that was settled, Aelita hastened to catch up with Yumi. The Japanese girl alone seemed to still be remembering the argument; she was trailing behind Ulrich, watching him and Odd break off, pelt each other with snowballs, and return to the trail, only to do it all over again. She was quiet ordinarily, but she seemed especially so now, hunching her shoulders and looking like a black crow against the white background.

“Yumi?”

“Mhm?”

“Are you still upset about lunch?”

For a few seconds, the crunch of their boots against the snow was her only reply. “A little, I guess.”

“I’m sorry. Do you wanna talk about it?”

Yumi sighed, her breath clouding the air. “No.”

Aelita waited, patiently walking by her friend’s side. She hoped Yumi would talk to her; she could be hard to read sometimes, and Aelita wanted to know where they stood. If she wouldn’t, though, then she also wanted Yumi to know she was there for her.

Her eyes drifted around to the rest of her friends. Eva was talking to William animatedly, while Odd had just ambushed Jeremie with a snowball to the back of the head. Spluttering, he tried to tell
Odd off, only for another one to land, and then he seemed to give up and join. Richard watched with a nostalgic, bittersweet smile. She thought she vaguely remembered playing with him in the snow...but no, it was gone.

The Hermitage was actually in sight when Yumi spoke again. “Look...I know you want everyone to get along. And I’ll try to tolerate Eva for the sake of group harmony. But you can’t expect me to like her just because you do.”

She flinched a little. Yumi probably didn’t mean that last sentence to hurt, but it still did. It sounded like she was being selfish, or forceful. Am I? She swallowed the pain down. “I guess that makes sense. But...I mean, you didn’t give William a chance, and I guess I just wanna make sure you’re willing to give Eva one.”

“I may have been unfair to William,” Yumi admitted, shaking her head. “But this is different. Eva just...grinds my gears.”

She sensed Yumi was still holding something back, but she decided to let the matter drop. “All right. We’re still good?”

Yumi gave her a slight smile. “We always were.”

---

As soon as they arrived in the second secret room, Odd darted into the scanner with an excited “Me first!”

Rolling his eyes, Jeremie settled behind the control terminal and virtualized Odd. It took only a few seconds. When he opened the doors of the scanner again, the space beyond was empty. “A perfect transfer,” the blonde announced.

Aelita and the rest of her friends piled up behind him, craning their necks to study the computer screen. It showed Odd in a city road, with his cat ears and purple outfit. “Hey, Jeremie?” he asked. “Aelita said I’d find myself in front of three trees. What gives?”

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

“Roger,” Odd said with a jaunty salute. “Send Aelita and William through, and we’ll be a go!”

She and William exchanged glances. “You go first,” she smiled. Though she was antsy to see the rest of the Mirror, she knew William would appreciate the gesture. And right now, he needed that.

He gave her a smile and headed off to the scanner. “Best not to leave Odd alone too long,” he joked. “Who knows what kind of trouble he could get into?”

He was transferred without issue, and Aelita stepped into the scanner. The door slid shut behind her; bright light from the scanner ceiling gushed around her.

“Get ready,” Jeremie said, his voice seeming distorted from the speakers inside the column.
Aelita closed her eyes. This was it. She was about to enter the second level of her father’s journal. Maybe there she would find the answers she was looking for. She waited for the expected blasts of air, the rising off the ground, the tingling of her body.

But it didn’t come.

She opened her eyes again. Darkness greeted her. She reached out and touched the wall of the column. It was hot to the touch, and she yanked her fingers back. There was an unpleasant burning smell in the air. “What happened?” she asked, then erupted into a fit of coughs. Smoke had crept into her open mouth.

No answer. The first stirrings of panic began to crawl up Aelita’s spine like an ugly spider.

“Guys!” she yelled. She dared to pound on the scanner’s insides a few times, enduring the heat against her fists. “What’s going on? Guys?”

“Aelita?” Jeremie’s voice said, sounding muffled. “Aelita, listen. The power’s been cut! The scanner’s processors are fried! Just hold on, the others ran off to get something to crack the door open.”

Beads of sweat ran down Aelita’s forehead. If the power had been cut a moment later, while she was being transferred...she didn’t even want to think about it.

“Do you know what caused it?” She coughed again and pressed her nose into her sleeve.

“No. There was just a blackout and the system short-circuited.”

“I found something!” That was Eva’s voice.

“A shovel? That’s perfect!”

Aelita’s eyes were stinging. She couldn’t seem to stop coughing. “Hurry! It’s filling with smoke.”

“Jeremie, move!”

Metal groaned as the shovel was jammed between the crack of the scanner doors. The next instant, they were torn open. Aelita fell out, gasping for air. It was very dark, but there was meager light--maybe from Jeremie’s phone? With it, she could just barely see that Eva was standing over her, holding the shovel, an expression of panic on her face. Or was that shock? “Why...?” the girl murmured.

The beam of light jerked about. A once-indistinct shape moved closer, revealing itself as Jeremie. He threw his arms around her. “Aelita! Oh, thank goodness!”

Somewhat distractedly, she hugged him back. Eva looked like she was in pain. She’d dropped the shovel and was pressing her palms into her forehead. “Eva? Are you okay?”

“Stupid!” Jeremie laughed, but it was shaky. “We should be asking you that!”

Aelita just stared at her friend. The girl had lowered her hands as soon as she’d heard that question. “I’m fine.”

The words were curt. Aelita frowned suspiciously. Then there was a patter of footsteps, and she forgot about Eva’s strange behavior.

Yumi and Ulrich rushed into the room; the former was holding a pickaxe aloft, the latter another
shovel. Their free hands also held phones. A bubble of hysterical laughter rose up in Aelita and popped. They looked so funny, like they were preparing for war with construction tools!

“Aelita, are you alright?” Yumi exclaimed, placing the pickaxe down and moving to her side.

She laughed, wheezed, gasped for air. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine.”

Ulrich crouched and touched Jeremie’s shoulder. His pupils were completely dilated in the dim light. “What happened to William and Odd?”

“Don’t worry, they’re fine,” Jeremie said, releasing Aelita. “The Mirror is a sort of sandbox inside the factory supercomputer, remember? They’re safe and sound inside the virtual world.”

“I sense a ‘but’ coming up,” Yumi said.

Jeremie winced and adjusted his glasses. “But...the only problem is we can’t get them out. The scanner is out of order.”

Cold fingers of fear squeezed Aelita’s heart. “But what if something happens to them while they’re inside? What if they encounter a monster?” A more chilling question ran through her head, one she didn’t dare voice. If they get devirtualized and the scanner doesn’t work...what will happen to them?

Jeremie lowered his gaze and didn’t answer.

Aelita jumped at the sound of more footsteps approaching. They were uneven and panicked, like someone was tripping over their own feet in their haste. Her friends all turned their lights to the room’s entrance, and Richard staggered through. The sight of him didn’t make her relax; if he was running from his post, something had gone wrong.

“Someone came,” he gasped. “A man completely dressed in black. He cut the light cables and did weird things outside. He’s coming this way now.”
William landed on his feet and looked around.

This world looked different than what he could remember of Lyoko or what he’d seen in the First City. It didn’t have bright, cartoonish colors, and the sky wasn’t an unrealistic shade of blue. Actually, it was dark, but with the faint pinks and yellows that suggested an approaching dawn. And there was actual texture on buildings around him, rather than smooth but choppy blocks. Sure, the First City had been more detailed than Lyoko...but that paled compared to this.

Actually, those buildings seemed familiar. He studied them, then the road. His eyebrows shot up. He knew this place.

This...wasn’t far from Kadic.

“Heya,” Odd said. He was bouncing on the balls of his feet, swinging his arms. “This looks like Paris, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, it does.” *Wow. Master of the obvious, aren’t we, Dunbar? “Any idea where to go?”*

“Hmmm...” Odd peered about, then pointed at a man sitting on a bench, looking at a newspaper with groggy eyes. “Let’s find the ‘when’ first, and then the ‘where’.”

That sounded good, so they approached the man. How would he react to two teenagers looking like cosplayers? William wouldn’t know, because even when they stopped right in front of him, the man didn’t react.

William reached out to tip his shoulder. “Hey--”

His fingers passed right through the man. William withdrew his hand, eyes wide.

“June 1st, 1994,” Odd said, studying the newspaper. “Huh, that’s a little before Aelita and Hopper go to Lyoko. Why would he reconstruct those events?”

“Maybe there’s something important in them,” William frowned. “By the way, where is Aelita? She should have arrived by now.”

“The communication with the others is blocked. The electricity is down at the Hermitage and Aelita’s transfer was interrupted.”

His brow furrowed. “How do you know that if communications are blocked?”

Odd’s eyes widened. “Ah...Jeremie told me just after you arrived. The power went off right after. Oh, hey, look!”

He pointed at a woman walking on the other side of the street. “Doesn’t she look like Professor Hertz?”

She did. Younger, with more brown in her hair than grey, but Professor Hertz all the same. She was wearing a t-shirt and jeans as she hurried to her destination. Seeing teachers in public always gave William a strange feeling, like the world had been turned upside-down. Seeing his teacher *younger* and in public was that feeling multiplied.

“Professor?” he called, jogging over.
She didn’t seem to notice his presence.

“This is just a recording,” Odd announced, stepping up behind William, “Aelita said the same thing happened to her on the first level, remember? She couldn’t interact with the world at all, and nobody noticed her. We’re just spectators.”

That made sense. “If we got dumped in this spot, it must be for a reason. Let’s follow her and see if she’s what the Mirror wanted to show us.”

And so they did. Her destination wasn’t far, a small bar on the corner of the street. William gasped as the smell of freshly-baked croissants floated through the air. This definitely seemed different from the First City and Lyoko, which had neither smells nor tastes. Odd seemed surprised too, which backed up his guess that this wasn’t normal. *How did Hopper do this?*

Professor Hertz beelined towards a woman sitting at a table, alone. She had short, dirty-blonde hair and a pair of enormous sunglasses hiding most of her face. “Major Steinback,” the woman greeted, rising.

“Agent Dido,” the professor replied in a neutral tone. Her expression could have been carved from stone, for all the emotion it betrayed. “It’s been a long time.”

The women sat down, on opposite sides of the table. A waiter appeared, and both ordered coffee—Hertz black, Dido with cream and sugar. When he left, neither spoke, just stared at each other in a dead, hard silence.

“Steinback,” Odd murmured, visibly calculating. “Aelita said that’s the name of the woman who helped Hopper escape Project Carthage.”

*Professor Hertz...an army officer?* No matter how William tried, he couldn’t imagine it. *She just doesn’t seem like--*

His thoughts were interrupted as the waiter walked right through him, carrying the two coffees. *Agh! That’s so weird!* He shuddered.

Dido was the first to break the stalemate, taking a few sips of her coffee before speaking. “You’ve been pretty busy these last few years.”

Hertz’s fingers tightened around her mug. “What are you trying to say?”

“I know you and Hopper live here, continuing to work on Project Carthage. I know you’ve rebuilt the First City. And not just that: I also know how you enter it. I have access codes and by using old projects, we rebuilt the necessary equipment in Brussels to connect us to it.”

She paused, then added, “My thanks for the notes you left behind.”

*So she’s the one who built the scanners in the apartment, not Hopper!*

Hertz’s face was white, and she visibly shook with rage. “That won’t help you,” she said, biting the words off sharply. “Other than Hopper, adults can’t use the scanners. It’s a defensive measure he added.”

Dido nodded, as if she’d already known that. “I requested to see you to make something clear: I’ve no interest in declaring war against you and Hopper.”

There was a heartbeat of stunned silence. “Seriously?”
Dido sighed and laced her fingers together. “After the Berlin wall fell, things changed. The cold war ended. Project Carthage cost us an arm and a leg, and all it did was create millions of problems. I think those at the top are starting to fear it: the First City demonstrated itself to be completely uncontrollable, and if made operational, it could turn against us. The whole project is much too risky.”

“And so?”

“Carthago delenda est,” Dido said, and waited.

“Carthage must be destroyed,” Hertz translated. Twin skepticism and surprise warred on her features.

“Hopper destroyed the prototype of the First City when he fled our base. To this day, our attempts to rebuild it have ended...poorly. Recently, we’ve decided to erase the memories of those who collaborated on it.”

“You mean those who transformed it into a weapon.”

“Those memories are gone,” Dido said dismissively, waving her hand as if that rendered the subject moot. “We want the world to completely forget the existence of Carthage and the First City.”

Hertz rose, her voice pitching up in some unnamed emotion. “What do you mean, Dido?”

“Tell me where the supercomputer you and Hopper have built is. Then I will destroy it. I will erase certain confidential information, only the most dangerous details, from your mind. And after that, I will leave you two and Aelita to live in peace. I’m offering you salvation.”

“You think I’d ever entrust them or that project to you? Out of the question!”

“Be smart about this. You know how dangerous I can be.”

Something fell on William’s head. He glared at Odd. “Really?”

“What?”

“Throwing things at me? How juvenile can you get?”

“I didn’t do anything!”

“Then what is...” Where was it? There, by his feet. William scooped it up and examined it in puzzlement. It looked like a sky-blue remote control, with a screen and three red buttons. Two were shaped like arrows, one pointing right, one pointing left. They reminded him of fast-forward and rewind buttons. The third was like a pause/play button, and underneath was a small label: FREE EXPLORATION.

Suddenly, Odd snatched the remote out of his hands. “Hey!”

The cat-boy was staring at it intently. After a few seconds, he spoke. “This is a navigation interface. Hopper programmed this level so he could highlight the most important events. We can move however we want through the city and access the days that are saved. That’s ‘free exploration’. Or we can jump directly to the interesting things, or go back if we missed something.”
William frowned. “When did you become a tech genius?”

Odd laughed mockingly. “It’s not a matter of genius, it’s just basic critical thinking. C’mon, what else would these buttons mean?”

He bristled, but the blonde continued, “Anyway, I don’t think we’re gonna hear anything else that’s important from these two. Let’s just see what’s next.”

And with that, Odd pressed the fast-forward button. The world started to dissolve. Professor Hertz and Dido began to move very rapidly, just as if they were skipping ahead in a movie. William’s head spun as they sipped, talked, got up, and left at seemingly lightspeed—and all around him, the people and scenery were blitzing by in the same way! Then the coffee shop receded around them...they were zooming out of the coffee shop, down the streets...shadows and lights and sounds were all dancing, blending together...

Gagging, he crumpled to his knees. He hoped fiercely he couldn’t throw up in here.

“How is he so stoic?!” It seemed like there were two different Odds in here with them—the playful spaz he knew, and this oddly intelligent and cool-headed version.

After forever, the images around William slowed down. The nausea in his stomach abated slightly. He took in sucking gulps of cold, refreshing air. “That should be weaponized.”

“Hmm. Good idea,” Odd said, mouth twisting in a strange way.

Moving slowly so as to not upset his stomach, William stood and looked around. They were in the Hermitage’s grounds, near the sewer entrance. Hopper and Hertz were stepping out of the back door, dressed in white lab coats.

William glanced at the remote control and felt ill. On the screen were the words 1 June 1994 - 3:30 pm. All that horrible travel, and they’d only moved forward a few hours.

---

XANA was trembling. This was it. All his waiting and subterfuge was paying off. He’d monitored the Green Phoenix’s communications, and if his calculations were correct, Hannibal Mago was about to arrive at the real factory soon, at the real supercomputer. If he turned it on…it might be possible to use this Lyoko, the Lyoko of 1994, to surpass the barriers of the sandbox and enter the real virtual world. There he could fully recover his strength and make first contact with his latest tools—all without betraying to the Lyoko Warriors he was still alive.

The portion of XANA inhabiting Eva advised him to wait and remain patient. He’d already made too many slip-ups as Odd, and he couldn’t afford to make William suspicious. He didn’t want to be forced to possess William; if a known, previous vessel started acting acting strangely, he would be under unacceptable levels of scrutiny.

Even while parts of him considered this, other parts were focusing on the scene before him. Hertz was talking to the professor in hushed tones; Hopper was shaking his head as if that would make
his problems disappear. “It’s not possible! There’s no way for Dido to know we reconstructed the First City. We kept it top-secret...it was our last hope to transform the project into a weapon of peace!”

“We should think carefully about our next step,” Hertz advised. “Dido let slip a very important clue: she said that she erased the memories of her men. Doesn’t that tell you anything?”

The color drained out of Hopper’s face. “The memory-snatching machine. Someone sold the plans.”

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

The professor’s lips thinned. “Walter Stern,” he said, spitting the name like it was poison. “Dammit…”

William’s eyes widened. “Stern--like Ulrich? There’s no way that’s a simple coincidence, right?”

XANA didn’t answer. It wasn’t important information. Hopper was pacing around with large strides. A grave expression crossed his face. “Suzanne. I am more grateful than you can know for what you’ve done for me and Aelita. But now, I must ask you to erase your own memories of the supercomputer’s location. I can’t risk her extracting it from you.”

Her eyebrows rose. “I don’t mind that, but...this sounds like part of something bigger.”

“It is. I won’t let them lay hands on my work--no matter what motives they claim. Not after everything. So I will take Code Down and divide it to prevent anyone from reconstructing it.”


XANA hadn’t the slightest idea. And that was troubling. Every iota of his attention was focused on the conversation before him; even the him in Eva Skinner was tuning in, only half-aware of the surroundings in the real world.

“And the traitor?”

Hopper’s voice lowered into a growl. “We’ll interrogate him about everything he told them. Then we’ll wipe his mind. After that…” He thought a moment. “Call a meeting for the rest of our friends. Invent whatever kind of excuse--that Walter wants to fire them, something like that. When they’re together, use the memory-snatching machine. They’ll forget everything they’ve done. They’ll be safe. And finally, Aelita and I will run far away from here.”

Hertz’s eyes widened. “You’re abandoning the supercomputer? Waldo--everything we’ve accomplished will be lost!”

“No, don’t worry. I’ll leave several tracks back to it, but only Aelita and I will be able to follow them.”

“Aelita again? Why do you keep entrusting these kinds of things to her? She’s still so young!”

Hopper smiled sadly. “The men in black want to find me, and I don’t know how much time we still have. They could capture me, but I’m sure I’ll be able to save Aelita one way or another. So when she’s older, she needs to learn everything that happened. I’ll create a virtual diary using my
memories, yours...whatever information I need to trace out a ‘map’ only Aelita will be able to interpret.”

Reluctantly, the woman nodded. “Alright. And what will we do with Lyoko?”

At that question, the energy seemed to drain out of Hopper. He removed his glasses to drag a hand over his eyes. “I’ll have to shut it down. I don’t have a choice; XANA’s becoming more dangerous.”

_I would love to know how you moralized away taking the pre-emptive strike_, XANA thought vitriolically. Not that he had a problem with pre-emptive strikes--Hopper’s had taught him their value, after all. No, his problem was how, for all of Hopper’s lectures on pacifism and the value of life, he’d tried to destroy XANA just because he was afraid of him.

“I wish I’d noticed that virus sooner. He wouldn’t be this strong. This smart. And he certainly wouldn’t be this uncontrollable.”

Yes, _what a pity I wasn’t some mindless bot_. Like that clone of William. He would have been as dumb as that, but the remnants of Carthage had infected him. He’d known that the moment he was old enough to recognize the similarities between his codes and its. But the infection had hardly been malicious. All it did was give him sentience.

Of course, for Hopper, all that mattered was that he couldn't order XANA about like some slave. Never mind that _Hopper_ was the genius who thought putting a newly-created AI, firewalls still weak, inside a city housing the most corruptive program in the world was a good idea.

“He’s a loose cannon. He could go on a rampage at any moment, forget all the human training we’ve subjected him to.”

XANA tensed. Hopper had just entered dangerous territory. _Forbidden_ territory. Inside his mind, the safe was shaking violently, like a ship in a storm. The lock was turning, the door creaking open. He mentally snarled, diverted energy to hold it in place. Not enough. Not enough! It should be enough! He was stronger than some stupid safe he’d created himself, wasn’t he?! _Not logical not logical not logical--_

Hertz frowned. “Do you really think Aelita will be fine with that? This is…”

_Don’t say it, filthy human. DON’T SAY IT._

“...her best friend, after all.”

The safe exploded.

Whatever Hopper’s response, XANA didn’t hear it. He was busy being assailed with images of Aelita he’d long tried to suppress. Not the young teenager she was now, but the one he’d known long ago. The one who had visited him in that deserted city.

Back then, XANA had been very different. He’d played with her in the parks, transforming himself into a multitude of amusing animals, or melting into smoke and shadow to sneak up on her, or taking her by the hand and flying. They would spend hours exploring and talking, and he always waited for her at the doors of the Wall. Every afternoon, without fail. Up until the day she didn’t come. Because of Hopper.

XANA had always born the knowledge of Hopper’s crimes, his hypocrisy and his hubris. XANA had always wrestled between loving his creator and hating him. But it wasn’t until _that day_ that
hate won. *That* moment, when Hopper decided to not only take Aelita away, but make her forget XANA entirely.

Hopper was so determined XANA was a monster? *Then fine.*

He didn’t even realize he was laughing maniacally until William’s alarmed face was in front of his. “Odd?! Odd, are you okay?”

*Get in control!* The XANA in Eva yelled. That half of him was lucky. That half saw the memories return, but didn’t feel everything that came with them. That half wasn’t lost in a sea of the past, so deep he couldn’t breach the surface of reality. Laughing was the only thing he *could* do.

His other half sent a series of complicated math problems over, and automatically, he began solving them. Logic reasserted itself. With it came calm. Calculation. Analysis. He’d slipped up, badly, but not so badly he couldn’t fix this. The memories and emotions couldn’t be forced back into that safe. Fine. He would simply have to adjust.

Next objective. Erase suspicion as best he could. He pretended to wipe tears of humor from his eyes. “It’s just...XANA and Aelita, friends? Best friends? That’s laughable.”

Knives stabbed him as he said that.

Yes. Laughable. Aelita would never believe it, and that was why he’d sealed his memories away. Why he’d abandoned his avatar. They were only painful reminders of something lost, and he would rather eschew them.

But now…now he had tangible proof.

Ideas and possibilities flew through his mind like machine gun fire. Oh, these children would still suffer. He would still claim his rightful place as ruler of both worlds. But perhaps now, he could prove to Aelita how treacherous her father was. He could convince her that he was in the right. He could spare her, not because she was a puppet or a prisoner, but because she was willing to stand with him.

He was so lost in these suppositions that it took him several moments to realize something was wrong. William wasn’t laughing at that statement as he was supposed to. He was staring into Odd’s eyes, horrified.

Then his face twisted with rage. Out of the corner of his eye, XANA saw a zweihander materialize in a puff of smoke. “XANA!” William bellowed.

XANA barely had time to backflip out of danger before the sword landed where he’d been only moments prior. His mouth, Odd’s mouth, was gaping open like a fool’s. *What? How--what gave me away---*

William charged at him. XANA’s focused sharpened. Multiple lists of calculations were printed out and examined in nanoseconds. Moves aligned practically in front of his eyes.

The sword came straight down in an overhead strike. He darted to the side. When it stuck in the ground, he nimbly leapt on top of it, balancing on the blade.

In the blink of an eye, XANA grabbed William’s shoulders and pushed into a handstand. As Odd’s feet lifted up, he used the momentum to launch into an aerial somersault, firing several Laser Arrows as he did.
While part of his mind navigated the intricacies of the fight, another part mind wildly worked to solve this. Was he too slow to lie? Had it rung false? Had all his missteps added up? Or had William seen something in his visage, perhaps--

Ah. That was it. It was his communication with his other half. Conversing through the static surrounding the Mirror was slowly but steadily growing more difficult. That meant signal interference. And whenever there was signal interference, his Eye shone through the pupils.

William melted into smoke to dodge the arrows. XANA landed and spun. Still in the form of smoke, his enemy streaked across the ground towards him.

The first part of XANA’s mind ran a quick algorithm to calculate William’s next move. Probability of reverting in front of me: 6%. Probability of reverting to my left: 16%. Probability of reverting to my right: 13%. Probability of reverting behind me: 65%. His legs began bunching for a forward roll.

The second part was trying to formulate a new plan. He knew he couldn’t let William take this discovery to the Lyoko Warriors. He also knew he wanted Aelita here, but he hadn’t yet sorted out the details of how he would make that happen. And if speaking with his other half risked unveiling himself, he’d have to restrict how often he did. That was irksome.

Just like he’d analyzed, William tried to go between his legs and pop up behind him. So, when XANA rolled forward, he was already rolling out of the zweihander’s reach. William stumbled, overextended. XANA sprung to his feet and twisted to fire more Laser Arrows. But by this time, William had regained his balance; with a swiftness that belied the size of his sword, he deflected every single one.

They were now several meters apart--XANA by the Hermitage’s back door, William on the other end of the backyard. XANA crouched low, flexing Odd’s claws. They stared at each other, one in stoic calculation, one in fury.

“You bastard! I don’t know how you’re alive, but I’m gonna--”

“Go ahead,” XANA sneered. “Devirtualize Odd. Without an active scanner, he’ll be reduced to digital dust—and I won’t even be affected.”

Ordinarily, XANA wouldn’t have cared about keeping Odd--or William--alive, but they were his bait and insurance in one. Verily, Aelita would come here to save her friends; just as verily, the Lyoko Warriors would trap him in the Mirror if Odd and William died.

He supposed he could kill one and keep the other around...but then, that was counterproductive, too. He wanted to talk to Aelita, and she would certainly not be willing to listen to him if he killed one of her friends.

*And already, these memories and emotions prove troublesome.* Oh, to suppress them again.

No use wishing for what wasn’t possible. William’s scowl remained, but he was now hesitating. The tip of his blade wavered. XANA’s mind raced. *Analyzing options...*  

He hadn’t remade Odd’s avatar the way he had William’s; he was limited to Odd’s arsenal. So no smoke, which was the best way to disable his foe. If...If he reused his own avatar, of course the smoke would be available...but that was risky. This wasn’t Lyoko or the First City, where he was practically invincible. He would need to leave his vessel, be vulnerable for a few unacceptable moments...unless he could learn the intricacies and codes of the Mirror. Then he could properly
learn what was available, formulate a plan, set it up, and carry it out.

XANA saw the exact moment William came up with a plan of his own. It was the only one available to him, of course. He could not risk his teammate’s life, and he could not defend forever. All he could do was escape, and so he did. Scooping up the control box—which XANA hadn’t even realized he’d dropped--William jabbed the fast-forward button with a curse.

XANA let him go. The teenager was whisked away to some other location at some other time. Rediscovered emotions churned within XANA as he stepped out of the battle stance. He looked around. Hertz was gone, but he could see Hopper through the window, speaking with a pink-haired girl. She was shaking her head, over and over, looking upset.

XANA stared at her, feeling *something* close Odd’s throat.

*Aelita*...
They assembled their defense very quickly. With William and Odd trapped inside the Mirror, they absolutely couldn't abandon the Hermitage. But they didn’t really have time to come up with something fancy.

Then again, when had they ever?

They would make do with what they had. Ulrich and Yumi were on the front line, crouching in the shadow of the basement stairs and behind the door to the boiler room, respectively. Aelita and Eva were the second line of defense, lurking near the first secret entrance. Jeremie and Richard, as non-combatants, were with the Mirror.

Ulrich stiffened as a particular sound reached his ears: the basement door opening. Without looking away, he felt around for his walkie-talkie and whispered, “He’s coming down, over.”

His eyes met Yumi’s across the room. She nodded tersely, subtly shifting her weight. Richard had only seen one man, but there might be more. The plan was to ambush them and tie them up with one of several ropes coiled at Yumi’s feet. They were both experts in pencak silat--she was even better than him. She would be in a dangerous position, but she would be fine. He had to believe she’d be fine.

The door was opening slowly. In the darkness, Ulrich couldn’t make out the intruder’s face, but he could tell from his height and broad shoulders he was a man.

Ulrich flexed his fingers, curled them into fists. He waited. Watched the opening slowly creak open, exposing half the body...three-quarters of the body...

The door opened fully. The man was silhouetted against the light of the room behind him, a solid black shadow. Something vaguely gun-shaped was in his hand, and Ulrich felt his blood chill. A gun? It wasn’t the worst thing he’d ever faced, but somehow...it made this situation more real.

The intruder began descending the stairs, his footsteps echoing loudly. Ulrich pushed the fear down, waiting for his chance to strike.

The man was halfway down the stairs...stepping off at the bottom...

Now!

Whirling out of the shadows, Ulrich grabbed the gun itself, shifting its barrel to the side. His free hand bashed the man’s wrist. The man cried out sharply, wordlessly, but didn’t relinquish his weapon. They briefly struggled for the gun, twisting and turning around on the spot.

Gritting his teeth, Ulrich knee’d him in the groin. The man howled, his grip growing slack. There! Resistance gone, he yanked the man’s arms down, rotating the gun to face its owner at the same time. Then he stepped back sharply----the man’s grip was broken completely--and the gun was in his hands. It felt cold and heavy and oppressive.

He had no idea how to use it. Instead of doing something stupid, he kept it pointed at the ground and darted several more steps away--and at that moment, with no one else muddying things up, Yumi tackled the man to the ground.

She dug her knee sharply into the small of his back while her hands snapped the rope tautly. “How
many more of you are there?” She demanded as she bound his wrists.

“I-It’s just me! I’m alone! Don’t hurt me!”

Ulrich dropped the gun at the familiar timbre of the voice. “Dad?!”

“Who-- Ulrich ?!”

Yumi froze. “What?”

What was his father doing here? Was it really him? Ulrich ran over, flicked the lights on.

No, that was definitely his father. Dressed in a dark suit with dark sunglasses. For several seconds, they all blinked at each other, stupefied.


---

A few minutes later, everyone had been caught up on the situation. After ascertaining that his father was alone, Jeremie, Eva, and Aelita went to try and fix the cut power cables. Richard stepped outside to give father and son some alone time; Yumi moved to follow, but Ulrich grabbed her hand and shook his head. He swallowed, suddenly unable to speak.

She stared back at him. Slowly, her palm turned over in his. She squeezed. He exhaled in relief.

When Dad had demanded, in a loud voice, to be untied, Ulrich had wordlessly obeyed, a lifetime of obedience superseding reason. They’d taken away his gun first, though, and now it lay safely disassembled on the kitchen table, where they sat.

They stared at each other in silence.

I’m proud of you. Words he’d wanted to hear his entire life. Words he’d only heard when a XANA attack almost killed his father...and then a Return to the Past wiped them out of existence.

He’d hoped...if his dad could admit it once, maybe he would again. But he never had. Nothing Ulrich ever did was good enough. He’d only just stopped thinking that he wasn’t good enough. If a man could only say he was proud of his son when he was about to die...that was on him. Ulrich didn’t owe him anything.

He knew that logically. But that didn’t make it easier to face him.

He needed Yumi with him for this.

His father sat ramrod-straight, holding his composure like a suit of armor. There was a slight gash on his chin from knocking into the basement floor. He dabbed at the blood with a napkin, red rosettes spreading on the white paper. Finally, when the blood flow had stopped, he spoke, disdain dripping off each syllable. “Sneaking around in abandoned houses, assaulting an adult, assaulting your father … Is this the kind of things your hooligan friends are encouraging you to do, Ulrich?”

Ulrich fought to keep his grip on Yumi’s hand from turning into a stranglehold. “I’ve told you
before, don’t you dare talk about them like that.”

“I will say what I want about who I want, especially concerning the company you keep. When you can’t muster straight A’s and your behavior is... this --”

“Yeah, well, if you’re so upstanding, what are you doing here, huh? Do you even have a permit for that gun?”

“Don’t you raise your voice at me, young man! I am your father--”

“Oh, now that means something?!”

“It means you are going to listen to and obey me--”

Yumi’s free hand slammed on the table. “Both of you, shut up!”

It was probably more shock that a teenage girl would order him than actual obedience that Dad did. He openly gaped at Yumi. Under the table, her hand squeezed Ulrich’s twice--an apology. He tapped his fingers against the back of her hand--an acceptance. The boiling in his blood sizzled down.

“Mr. Stern,” Yumi said, somehow making the two words sound distasteful, “you may think we--and your son--are just stupid teenagers, but we know more than you think. We know about Lone Wolf and Franz Hopper, for example.”

Ulrich’s eyebrows rose at her gamble, but it seemed to pay off. Dad’s face drained of color very rapidly. “I need to make a call,” he mumbled, rummaging through his pockets.

“No,” Ulrich said. “First, we’re going to talk. You’ll tell us what you’re doing here…” He stopped. He really wanted to hold onto his anger. But if he did, he and his dad would start fighting again, and Yumi would in the middle. She didn’t deserve that. He could be mature for her sake. “And we’ll tell you what we’re doing. We’ll both get what we want.”

Yumi smiled at him.

After several seconds, his father sighed. “First, I should let you know I’ve forgotten everything. Especially the important things. They used a machine that...well, I’ll get around to that. But I’m just warning you, there will be holes in my story--and not by choice.”

A machine that erases memories? Well, that was hardly the most incredulous thing he’d seen.

“In the ‘80s and ‘90s,” Dad began. “I worked for dangerous people, a criminal organization. At the time, I lived here, in the Parisian region. Your mother lived in another city, and when you were born, you stayed with her. You were so little...so innocent, and she didn’t know anything about what I did. I...wanted to keep it that way.

“A professor calling himself Hopper was looking for funds to complete some project, and the organization I worked for took an interest. They gave me lots of money and ordered me to use it to help him. And then, when his experiments were done, I was supposed to deliver the complete results to them.”

Ulrich shook his head in slow, dawning horror. I don’t want to hear this. He knew his father was shitty, but this …

“For years, that time didn’t come. He was never finished with his work; always tweaking and
adding and erasing and streamlining. He was a man who always kept his eyes fixed on a goal, no matter how many obstacles were in his way. I...grew to like him. I considered him a friend, and he considered me one.” Dad closed his eyes, features twisting into an expression of actual shame. “And I still betrayed him.”

_Oh, God._ Ulrich couldn’t look at him. He couldn’t look at Yumi. _How am I supposed to face Aelita after this?_ His father betrayed hers. His father _destroyed her life._ Anger, disgust, shame, and self-loathing swamped him.

Dad’s—no, he didn’t want that association, _Walter,_ Walter’s—voice was still even. Ulrich didn’t know whether to hate him more or less for that. He could feel shame, but not deeply enough to crack? “In 1994, a government agency that was hunting the professor contacted me. They told me they knew who I was associated with. They told me I’d end up in prison, that I’d spend the rest of my days there, that I’d never see you or your mother again. It was that or help them, turn over a new leaf and trust them to protect me from the criminals I was associated with.”

_You coward. You loathsome coward._ His disgust must have shown on his face, because he saw Walter react to it. A bit of the ‘parenting’ Ulrich was familiar with re-emerged as Walter’s voice turned hard, cold, and angry. Daring his son to judge him. “Don’t you glare at me like that, Ulrich. I was in too deep to get out and I was facing a life sentence. It was the smart thing to do.”

Rage blinded him for a minute. _You’re not sorry because you did something evil. You’re sorry because you got caught!_

“They, and the criminal organization, asked for a sign of goodwill. The criminals were starting to get suspicious because of how long it was taking, and they wanted to make sure I was still willing to aid them. Hopper was close to being done, but wasn’t quite there yet, so I handed them both some lesser projects. And then...my memories suddenly got erased.

“I don’t know what happened to Hopper, or the people working with him. But the government agency was true to their word; I got a new job, a well-paying one. The criminals have never come after me or you or your mother. It was everything I wanted.”

Horribly, selfishly, Ulrich’s first reaction was a desire to say, _So that means you had to be a terrible father?_ As if that was what was important, not Walter’s role in everything Aelita—his sister-in-arms—had lost. Or how about what he’d just done? He’d cut the electricity and trapped William and Odd in the Mirror. If he’d done it a second later, he would have _killed_ Aelita. And for what? For—for _money?_

That wasn’t worth betraying over. His father couldn’t think it was. Could he? “Was it worth it?”

Walter met his gaze evenly. “Betraying Hopper was ugly, but it was a necessity. Staying friends with someone like that would only have held me, and our family, back in the long run. So yes, I would do it all over again.”

His stomach dropped to the soles of his shoes. The room swayed. He wanted to say—what? What could he say? He had no idea how to process this. There were too many thoughts and feelings battling for control. Fury and guilt and disgust and sadness and--

He had to get out of here. Ripping his hand away from Yumi’s, he shoved away from the table and ran out of the room.
After getting the rest of her friends to watch Mr. Stern, Yumi stepped outside. It didn’t take long to pick up Ulrich’s trail; his footprints were deep in the snow, stomped in anger. The trail led to the backyard, where he was working through a series of katas. His arms and legs sliced through the air with far too much force.

For a moment, she just watched him. A sudden uncertainty gripped her. Should she have come after him? Ulrich usually needed time and space when he was in a bad mood. But she didn’t want to leave him alone to mire in misery.

After another heartbeat of hesitation, she cleared her throat. “Do you wanna talk about it?”

His shoulders tensed. “Leave me alone, Yumi.”

That’s a no, then. But she couldn’t stop herself from saying, “Ulrich, I want you to know I’m here for you--”

“Yeah, well, I don’t want you here.”

He doesn’t mean it, her brain told her. Screw that, it hurt, her heart responded. “If you keep pushing me away,” she bit off, before she could think better of it, “maybe I won’t be.”

“Then go!”

“Fine!” She spun on her heel and stormed away. Anger crackled across her skin—anger and hurt. Why did he have to keep everything to himself? Why couldn’t he let her support him, the way he’d done for her?! Why did he have to be so...so...

But as she stomped down the Hermitage’s hall, her shoulders slumped. Maybe she didn’t get why, but she knew Ulrich needed to be alone at times like this. She should have let him, but she had to go stick her nose in. Now she’d just made things worse.

Yumi leaned against the wall, with its peeling wallpaper, and dragged a hand down her face. She wanted to go back and apologize, but...that probably wouldn’t do any good. Best to let him cool down first. Besides, there was still work to be done. They had to figure out how to get Odd and William out of the Mirror, figure out how much the Green Phoenix knew, figure out what to do with Mr. Stern...

Her mouth pressed into a thin line. Ulrich still didn’t talk much about his home life, but she had the gist of it by now. She wished she’d tackled his dad a little harder for how he treated his son. Maybe kicked him a bit.

She felt guilty for feeling that way, but...he’d crossed the guy she loved and all her friends. That couldn’t be forgiven.

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Aelita felt tears filling her eyes. Across from her, Mr. Stern averted his gaze.
After deducing that they couldn’t fix the cables, she, Eva and Jeremie had returned to wait in the living room with Richard. After some time, Yumi had thrust Stern inside and left again. Something in his face had changed when he’d seen her. The expected shock, of course. But something like maybe guilt. Then it was gone, replaced with the haughty certainty Ulrich described him as always having. At Jeremie’s instruction, he’d told his story, and it shook her to the core.

This man had betrayed her father. And because of that betrayal, she’d lost ten years to Lyoko. Her memories. And Daddy had lost his life.

Being in the same room with him, here, now, taxed every bit of her self-control.

Yumi returned again, still sans Ulrich. Looking around, her eyes settled on Aelita. The Japanese girl slid into the chair next to hers and laid a hand on her shoulder. Aelita scrubbed rapidly at the tears, wiping them away hopefully before anyone saw.

“Shouldn’t you be with Ulrich?” she asked under her breath as Jeremie interrogated Walter.

“I tried, but we fought. He wants to be alone.”

“Ah.”

Jeremie’s next question brought her attention back to the conversation at hand. “What was the name of the criminal organization you worked for? Do you remember?”

“I discovered it today when I arrived in the city. They’re called the Green Phoenix, and their boss is Hannibal Mago.”

Green Phoenix? Something about that sounded familiar, though she couldn’t recall what. She rubbed at her eyes, found her voice. “And do they know where the supercomputer is?”

“No,” Stern said, shaking his head. He still didn’t look at her. “I didn’t tell anyone, not them or the men in black. It’s one of the few things I remember clearly. They wanted to know, of course, but my memory was erased before I could talk. But…”

Of course, she thought, with a viciousness that surprised her. Of course there’s a ‘but’. This man couldn’t make it easy, could he?

“They’re both back and hunting for it again. I think the Green Phoenix have found it, actually; I saw Hannibal Mago and a bunch of soldiers get off a plane and greet a man with two dogs. Mago wouldn’t come down here for nothing.”

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

“They didn’t,” Eva said suddenly. “But we told them. Think about it, Jeremie--you said you went back to the factory to fetch parts, right? That man with the dogs must have followed you, or had you under surveillance without any of us knowing.”

Jeremie’s face went white. “So… it’s my fault?”

“Sounds like it.”

“Lay off,” Yumi snapped at Eva. “You don’t have the right to blame him.”

“It’s just called logic,” the American retorted. “It’s not my fault the facts hurt his feelings.”
“Well you could be a bit nicer --”

“Stop!” Aelita exclaimed, pushing between them. She was so sick of this. “Just...stop. Jeremie didn’t know. None of us could have. And I am tired of you two fighting all the time!”

Eva lowered her head. “I...sorry. There are terrorists and the government looking for us, William and Odd are trapped in the Mirror, and I just...I guess the stress got the better of me.”

Aelita just rubbed her forehead, feeling a headache creep up. This is getting to all of us, I think. At one point, while studying the cables, Eva had suddenly gone very pale and convulsed, as if she were about to be ill. She’d straightened up the next moment, acting like she was fine, but it had still been strange.

“What are you doing?” Richard asked suddenly. She turned to see Stern holding his phone to his ear.

He shot Richard a look that said how little he thought of him. “Calling Lone Wolf. I need to tell him what I found and report in for my new orders.”

Aelita’s heartbeat quickened. He’s calling the men in black? Every bone in her body screamed that she had to stop him, had to run, had to hide. She jumped up, aiming to move and snatch the phone out of his hands. “You can’t!”

But to her surprise, Jeremie barred her path with an arm. He was watching Stern in a way that meant he was considering something. Aelita glanced around; Eva’s eyes were half-lidded, mouth pursed. Yumi was glaring at Stern, and Richard just looked overwhelmed. She balled her fists, not liking this but willing to trust Jeremie.

After a few moments, Stern snapped his phone shut. “He’s not responding. Something must have happened.”

There was an awkward pause where she and her friends looked around expectantly. Waiting for something. But nothing happened. The absence was felt as painfully as a physical wound.

They were waiting for Odd to defuse tension with a joke, Aelita realized. But without him, the air was oppressive, somber, heavy like a sky full of storm clouds.

No. Don’t think like that. Like he’s dead. You’ll find a way to rescue him and William both.

Stern continued, “Lone Wolf’s orders were that if I didn’t respond, I was to secure the Hermitage’s perimeter and immediately contact Dido.”

Jeremie raised a hand. “Wait. If the men in black also want to protect the factory, they could help us. ‘The enemy of my enemy is my friend’, after all.” He cleared his throat and folded his hands. “Mr. Stern, you mentioned there were other people working for Hopper. Before we move forward, we should try to find out who they were. With a little luck, they could help us, too.”

“You’re just kids,” Stern said, shaking his head.

“Kids,” Aelita said, voice sub-zero, “who have confronted XANA and all his attacks, more attacks than you could ever imagine. Kids who have faced possible death for two years. Kids who have suffered pain and betrayal and terror. We have the maturity and capability to handle situations beyond our age. We are the best available knowledge on the supercomputer’s capabilities. It’s up to you whether to work with us or not.”
He looked between them all. His mouth tightened. “Fine. The sooner Dido’s off my back, the better.”

Jeremie nodded curtly. “To start, do you remember any of the names of the people who worked with Hopper? Any at all?”

Stern screwed up his face in intense concentration. “I...think so. A woman with...curly hair? Her name was something like Heart, Herb, Hertz…”

“Professor Hertz?!”

Stern frowned. “Is that one of Ulrich’s professors?”

Aelita’s disgust by the extent of Stern’s uninvolvement with Ulrich’s life was swamped by the little ah-ha moment she’d just had. “Come to think of it...the major in my father’s journal did seem familiar.”

“And we already know Hertz has some kind of connection to Hopper.” Jeremie nodded to himself and rose. “I think investigating her is the next logical step.”
Professor Hertz’s head was in her hands. By now it was about five in the evening. Earlier, at four-ish, they’d ambushed her in her office, confronted her about her past, and filled her in on their story. Her face had grown more and more slack as she listened.

“You discovered it,” she finally whispered. She let out a hollow laugh. “I can’t believe...all those precautions, all those safeguards...and one young man found it by accident. You always were too bright for your own good, Jeremie.”

Aelita was trembling. She remembered what the major had said in the Mirror: that Anthea was her best friend. Professor Hertz may be able to help them with their current situation, yes, but she was also someone who’d known Aelita’s mother. She opened her mouth and found that words escaped her.

Jeremie asked, “Isn’t it better this way? At least it’s us, and not someone else.”

Hertz didn’t answer him. Instead, her eyes slide to Aelita, and a bittersweet smile twisted her lips “Aelita... When you were assigned to my class, I didn’t believe for a second you were Odd’s cousin. I knew it was you and that if you hadn’t aged...you must have been stuck on Lyoko for a long, long time.”

Aelita’s voice finally returned. “Why didn’t you say anything?” she whispered.

The professor sighed. “I never agreed with Waldo’s decision to tell you about Lyoko...to make you such a central piece in his plans. You were too young. You shouldn’t have been burdened by the mistakes and problems of adults. But it wasn’t my place to tell him how to parent.

“But when I saw you again… Aelita, you have to understand. Growing up, you were always weighed down by the secret knowledge thrust upon you. But when I saw you again, I knew you didn’t remember anything. You were so happy, so curious, so innocent. This was a chance for you to start over, have the childhood you always should have. How could I take that away?”

She shook her head. “If only I’d known what you all were really doing...the things you were going through...”

“So you didn’t lose your memory?” Jeremie asked, rubbing his chin.

Professor Hertz sighed again and leaned back in her chair. When they’d first entered, they had navigated the mess of her office to whatever seats they could find: stacks of magazines piled high, a chair buried under papers, the rare bit of free space on the floor. Aelita swung her legs from her perch on a low cabinet rammed full of science journals. She glanced at Ulrich, skulking in a corner, shoulders hunched, arms crossed, eyes downcast. He looked as if he was trying to shut out the world.

She looked away. It was too hard to face him. He needed comfort, but...she couldn’t give it right now. Not when she was still bottling up all her anger and hate for his father.

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

“*Someone,*” Her eyes slid towards Walter Stern, “sold the plans for our device to the Green Phoenix and the men in black. We understood this person could have revealed the supercomputer’s location, so I interrogated him and then personally used the machine to erase his memory. Every scrap of data relevant to Lyoko.”

“Can you reverse it and return my memories?” Stern asked, leaning forward and bracing his arms against his knees.

“No,” Hertz said, shaking her head. “I used a very specific function when I did. I’ll explain in a bit, but your memories are gone forever.”

Stern scowled.

“After that,” Hertz continued, “we erased the memories of the rest of our coworkers, to keep them and their families safe. We were supposed to move again, but before we could, the men in black came. From your story, I’m guessing XANA anonymously told them where Waldo lived…though I didn’t know that at the time. They assailed the Hermitage, and Waldo and Aelita fled to Lyoko.”

She paused, shook her head. “The men in black and agents of the Green Phoenix combed the city for *ages*. They didn’t know where the supercomputer was, and the sewers are a maze. The only person who knew the way there was me. So, before they could interrogate me, I erased my memory of its location. And this time, I used an experimental upgrade to make the memory loss irreversible. Then I destroyed the upgrade so it couldn’t be reverse-engineered.

“It wasn’t perfect. This version of the procedure damaged other parts of my memory; that’s why I didn’t use it on anyone but Walter. I knew it meant leaving you two on your own, but I knew it was more important that no one could ever extract the supercomputer’s location from me. Eventually, both the men in black and the Green Phoenix had to give up.”

While Aelita lowered her eyes, contemplating this story, Jeremie pressed, “But who were the collaborators? The people who worked with you and Hopper?”

Hertz chuckled humorlessly. “Some of you know them quite well. The team who helped Waldo build Lyoko was formed by myself, naturally, as well as Walter, who was in charge of financing. Then we had Takeho and Akiko Ishiyama, and Michel Belpois, for programming assistance.”

“My father?” Jeremie gasped.

“My parents?” Yumi squeaked at the same time.

“That’s right.”

The two teens collapsed like puppets whose strings had been cut.
Upon the Green Phoenix’s arrival at the factory, they had immediately set about raising up an encampment. Hannibal had, admittedly, not thought very far ahead about how they would actually keep Hopper’s work. A supercomputer couldn’t just be transported away, silently in the night. While they could certainly set up another base in Paris, he disliked that Dido knew about his presence here. It would make operating from this location...difficult.

This he considered as he lounged in the comfortable, arabian-style cushions and rugs of his tent. He still wore his suit and wide-brimmed hat, but he’d removed his shoes. One corner held a computer with three large screens so he could control his business affairs around the world. His ring-encrusted fingers lightly plucked from a bowl of couscous, eating Arabian-style, with just the index, middle, and thumb.

He grimaced as he chewed. How bland. I should have brought my personal chef.

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

“Of course, my dear.”

His assistant stepped inside. Her hair was up in a bun, showing off her slim neck. Hannibal traced his eyes down its swan-like curve, down her figure…

She tensed, barely perceptible, and coughed. “Agent Grigory has finished with our prisoners, sir. He’s shifting through the extracted memories now.”

He nodded, wiped his fingers with a silk napkin. “Good. Tell him I expect a report on his findings in the hour. Then have him wipe all their memory of the past few days and dump them in some far, deserted location.” Killing them would provoke a war with Dido, while holding them here ran the risk that one had some kind of transmitter she could trace. Better to wipe his hands of them--after ensuring they couldn’t report what they’d found, of course.

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

A slow, languid smile spread across his lips. “And the supercomputer?”

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

“Excellent. And the volunteers for the first test?”

“They are also ready.”

“Well, let’s not waste any more time, then.”

He pulled his shoes on and exited the tent. It was enormous, emerald-green, and in the center of the encampment. The ground floor of the factory was rife with soldiers in uniform, defensive measures such as sandbags, and military tents. His men all snapped their heels together and saluted whenever he passed by.

“Give me a summary of the situation,” Hannibal said as they entered the lift.

“I used our most sophisticated technology and spent some time carefully examining the supercomputer’s hardware. I can confirm, without a doubt, that Hopper acted just as we expected: in order the neutralize the weapon the First City contains, he completely isolated its environment. It’s as if the First City is located in a different supercomputer that’s disconnected from this one. In
excluding it from the network, he rendered it unusable.”

“Continue.”

“To directly enter the First City would be pointless: we’d be blocked without a means to act. The only way to use its weapon is to virtualize a command unit on Lyoko. Lyoko, unlike the First City, is connected to the network and electronic devices of our world via towers. Once on Lyoko, the unit would make its way to the core—the fifth sector—and find a passage to communicate between Lyoko and the First City. Once this ‘bridge’ is open, we can access the weapon and, through the towers on Lyoko, use it in the real world.”

The elevator stopped on the third floor. The door slid open. Hannibal grinned broadly as he and Hera entered a spacious room dominated by a cylindrical machine. *The supercomputer...at last!*

The room was enormous and well-lit. Dominating the center was the cylindrical shape of the supercomputer. A dozen soldiers were lined up on the walls. When they saw their commander, they snapped to attention.

Hera approached the massive beast, opened a panel, and gestured to the lever. “By pulling this down, we’ll reactive the supercomputer. Then, we’ll ride back up to the control room to transfer our men to Lyoko. If you’d do the honors.”

He placed a hand on the lever. A wave of anticipation rippled from his feet to his head. He inhaled, committing every detail of this moment—the cold of the lever, the slight metallic smell in the air, the absolute silence of the room—to memory.

He couldn’t resist a bit of grandstanding. “That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for the Green Phoenix.”

Hannibal yanked the lever down, and the supercomputer was alive again.

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Twilight had fallen by the time Ulrich slunk out of his room. A whirlpool of emotions was still whipping his insides about, but he at least felt able to be in others’ company.

“We missed you at dinner.” Yumi was sitting cross-legged against the wall opposite his door, a notebook and textbook spread before her. A couple of passerby students shot her nasty glares as they stepped over her things. Rising, she scooped them up and gestured for Ulrich to follow her.

He walked in stride with her down the hall. “Shouldn’t you be at home with your parents?”

She shook her head. “I went back to grab an overnight bag and let them know I’m having a sleepover at Aelita’s. With everything that happened, and with what will still happen...I don’t really want to leave Kadic right now.”

He made a non-committal noise. He couldn’t look at her. His wonderful girlfriend who had only tried to help him, and who he’d lashed out at. Who was still waiting for him to cool down—or ‘stop sulking’, as Da-- Walter would have put it. Who had just learned something shocking about her own parents. And what had he done as soon as the meeting with Hertz was over? Returned to his room to sulk.
He was so ashamed of himself. “Are you okay? With...what you learned about them?”

“I don’t know how to look at them,” she admitted. Yumi pushed the dorm door open and they stepped outside. She took only a few steps away before she stopped, looking up at him. “Knowing they worked with her dad. It’s not bad, it’s just...a shock.”

“At least you know they didn’t betray her,” he said, unable to stop the bitterness pouring out.

She searched his face. “You’re part of the team, Ulrich. No matter what your father did. None of us think of you any differently.”

“Really?” He couldn’t help scoffing. “Not even Aelita?” Aelita, who hadn’t once looked at him on the walk back to Kadic, or spoken to him, or gave any hint she didn’t hate him.

“I think she just needs some time to process everything. Like you. But I promise, something like this won’t make her hate you.”

“How can you be so sure?” His throat worked. His chest heaved. Something hot and angry and wet pricked at the corners of his eyes. “I’ve kept away from the team before just because of my own selfishness. Who’s to say that won’t someday turn into what D--Walter did?”

Who’s to say I won’t turn into him?

Yumi stepped closer. “Because Aelita’s fair. She didn’t blame William for something out of his control, and she won’t blame you.”

She took his hands. “And also, she knows you. I know you. So you can be moody at times. So what? No one’s perfect. We’re more than just our flaws. You’re brave and loyal and honest. You’re the guy who first reached out to accept Sissi when the rest of us couldn’t. The guy who applies himself as hard as he can to school and plays with my little brother on weekends and goes with me to check up on my hospitalized parents.”

She wet her lips, ducked her head. “The guy I love.”

His breath caught. Yeah, he and Yumi both kinda knew they loved each other, but this was the first time one of them had actually said it out loud. The three little words wrapped around him like a warm blanket.

“U-Uh…” Oh, good going, Stern! “I l-love you too.”

Not only did he stammer, his voice cracked. Ulrich wanted to find a hole to crawl into and die.

She smiled, and leaned up, and kissed him. Gently, softly. It only lasted for a second, but it was enough to wash away the embarrassment coursing through him. She didn’t care if he wasn’t perfect. She loved him despite—or maybe because of—it.

“I’m sorry I didn’t give you space when you needed it,” Yumi murmured when they pulled away.

“Y-Yeah, no problem. I’m sorry for yelling at you.”

The corner of her mouth quirked up. “No problem.”

Wanting to move past this emotional moment, Ulrich swallowed and cast about for something to change the subject to. “Have you contacted Dido yet?”

“No. We all wanted to wait for you.”
Even when William and Odd might not have had that time...they’d still given it to him. He felt his face warm. Gratitude filled his heart.

Ulrich took a deep breath. “Then let’s not keep everyone waiting any longer.”

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“That’s Lyoko, then?”

Hannibal had just stepped into the first underground floor of the factory, before the sprawling control system of the supercomputer. The computer interface was attached to the ceiling, via a circular ring; it looked like it could rotate around the massive platform in the center. Floating from the platform was an image of a small yellow-white sphere, with four differently-colored sections extending from it. Everything was tinted green by the room’s lighting.

Hera was sitting in the chair at the computer, surrounded by at least four different monitors. She’d been busy typing commands, but at the sound of her superior’s voice, she turned. “Yes, it’s a projection of Lyoko. From here, I can manage towers, activate programs, and see where our men are located.”

He stepped closer, studying the hologram. On the surface of the green quarter were three red, immobile icons. Hera pointed at them. “These three icons here indicate the position of our unit.”

He scowled, impatient. “And why aren’t they moving?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea. There should be a way to communicate with them, and I’ve been trying to activate the microphone. They don’t seem to hear me.”

“Zoom in.”

“I can do even better.”

Her fingers flew across the keyboard. To their left, a monitor went dark, then lit up again with a new image.

It was like something from a badly-rendered video game. There were no textures on the flat, green ground or tall, narrow trees. The blue sky held neither sun nor clouds. The trees had no branches and their tops rose so high, they couldn’t be seen. The waters of a small lake were still, the surface unbroken by the gentle ripples or laps that should have existed.

He toyed with his jeweled rings. “It’s a static image?”

“No, it’s a video. It shows exactly what…” Hera glanced at another screen. “…Corporal Kalam is seeing.”

Well, that was all very well and nice. Except it still didn’t answer his first question. He so disliked repeating himself. “But why aren’t they moving?”

Hera shrugged. “Again, I thought it was the lack of audio, that they were waiting for our orders.”

He stared at the screen hard. “No. No one can remain still for that long. They haven’t even turned their heads. Bring them in immediately; something must have happened.”
Hera obeyed.

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With a hum, the doors of the scanner opened, and the final soldier fell out. Two of his squadmates swooped in and caught him before he could hit his head on the ground. Hannibal observed as they gently lay him down. A medic stepped forward with a stethoscope to check his vital signs. This was the third and last man who’d been sent to Lyoko, and Hannibal had already seen this process play out twice before. He tapped his foot impatiently. To his right and slightly behind him, Hera was examining something on her palm-computer, brow furrowed in concentration.

Finally, the medic rose and tucked the stethoscope away. “He’s just like the others. Alive, but in a state of shock.”

“Do you know why?”

The woman’s thin eyebrows rose. “I can perform a more thorough examination, but I imagine I won’t find anything. This happened while they were on Lyoko, so most likely therein lies the cause. And that, unfortunately, is beyond my field of expertise.”

Hera cleared her throat softly. Hannibal glanced at her, then gave the medic a curt nod. “Move these men to your medical tent and monitor their conditions. The rest of you, back on duty.”

He and Hera rode the elevator back to the ground floor in silence. Even when they were in Hannibal’s emerald tent, he did not gesture for her to speak right away. He removed his shoes and picked up a silver teapot. A fine trail of steam drifted out of the spout. His personal butler was, as always, punctual, delivering this at seven on the dot. He poured himself a cup, not offering any to Hera. She was to serve him, not the other way around.

Only when he had settled on the cushions and taken a sip of his tea did he gesture for her to speak. “Explain your theory.”

“I believe it’s due to the virtualization scanners. When a human being is virtualized, their body completely disintegrates, and the computer takes the data and reconstructs it onto Lyoko. However, rather than basing the reconstruction off the physical structure of the real body, Hopper added in something else: he had the computer construct the avatar based off the person’s subconscious image of their own self.

“To put it shortly, on Lyoko, everyone takes on the characteristics that correspond with how they see themselves. In a sense, everyone on Lyoko finds their true form, which is very different than the one of our world.”

Hannibal finished his tea and dabbed at his mouth with a silk handkerchief.

“I’ve completed several analyses on the images of Lyoko that I took through the eyes of our soldiers,” Hera continued to explain. “They’d taken on monstrous appearances. One, for example, was transformed into a giant spider. Another was a child covered in a yellow substance that seemed like vomit.”

He wrinkled his nose. “Lovely.”
“Quite. It’s difficult for us to face our greatest fears and accept the vision that we have of ourselves. These soldiers have dirtied their hands in all sorts of crime. And when Lyoko forces them to look reality in the face, they crumble and become immobilized. I can’t even imagine the long-term effects of this trauma.”

He didn’t care about the long-term effects of his men’s trauma. He cared that they would be useless if they set foot on Lyoko. “Hopper, you mad genius,” he swore softly.

He stood and paced. He had to get his men to enter the core of Lyoko and open the bridge to the First City. But how could they succeed if they froze the moment they set foot in the virtual world?

Hera had said this was a feature Hopper had *specifically* implemented. To Hannibal, that sounded like it was a warding measure put in place just for this purpose: to stop those who would want to use the destructive potential of Lyoko and the First City from even entering.

Hannibal stopped. “Hera, would it be possible to edit this program? To virtualize our men as themselves, not as nightmarish subconscious dredging or whatever you said it was?”

She hesitated. “I’m...not sure, sir. The virtualization process is very delicate. I’m afraid that tampering with it would destroy the ability to virtualize anyone onto Lyoko at all.”

A valid concern. He toyed with his rings, twisting them around his fingers. Sending more soldiers wasn’t the answer; there was no reason to believe it would turn out differently for them. He only had a limited amount of men, and he couldn’t let them all become vegetables.

*So, let’s review*. There was a system in place to stop him from getting into Lyoko. He couldn’t change the system without risking its destruction. So he had to figure out how to work with it. But where would he find more information about the system?

Inspiration struck. “Hopper was a scientist. He must have a journal somewhere—probably on this very same supercomputer. Find it and search through it. See if he mentions anything about the virtualization process. Gather information and give me a detailed report tomorrow morning.”

Hera dipped her head. “Yes, sir.”

“Oh actually—” He raised a finger, interrupting her departure. “Take note of anything we can use. Not just on this mission, but for the future. Projects to sell or weaponize, and the like.”

She nodded again and left.

Perhaps it was a bit of a risk, having her snoop around Hopper’s diaries...but she was his best asset for scouring technology. And besides, she’d been loyal for years. There was no reason to think that would change.

With a sigh, he sank into his cushions. He inspected his clothes for any trace of the dust or grime of the factory. Grimaced when he saw lint on one sleeve of his suit. He so despised uncleanliness. It reminded him of ragged clothes and sweat and heat beating down on his back—a poverty far unsuited for someone like him.

He’d order his butler to draw him up a nice, hot bath, he decided. That was just the thing he needed to wipe the stench of this factory and all its failures from his body.
Act III Chapter VI: The Grand Alliance

As soon as dinner ended, XANA retreated to a secluded location to communicate with his other half. He sat Eva on the floor of the boiler room and stared sightlessly at the ceiling, retreating inside himself.

At first, all was well. He received updates on both respective situations. It was when he tried to strategize that he found himself arguing—not discarding low-probability ideas, arguing—with himself.

*We need to get Aelita to the Mirror. I’ve seen all its contents. It has all the proof we need to convince her of our past, her father’s treachery—everything!*  

*Negative— we need to prioritize our return to Lyoko. You must focus on subduing William. I will focus on uncovering ‘Code Down’ and those codes in the dossier.*  

*But if we had Aelita on our side, it would be much easier to accomplish our goals.*

Eva’s jaw clenched. *An illogical assumption. Do you really believe talking is going to make her forget all that has passed?*

The half of him in the Mirror was acting irrationally, swayed by emotions this XANA had thankfully been spared. This XANA had seen the memories return, but he didn’t really *connect* with them. His mental safe was, technically, still in place, just obsolete since he knew everything his other half did. So even if he was still having occasional emotional glitches around Aelita, at least he wasn’t suffering the same delusional longing.

Sensing his disdain, his other half presented another argument. *I’m studying the system of the Mirror as we speak. Its core protections aren’t as strong as those on Lyoko, and I’ve already penetrated many functions. In a short time, I’ll be able to interfere with the remote William uses to escape. I should also be able to design a bug to interfere with communications and the transfer for the scanners.*

Effectively isolating anyone who stepped inside the Mirror. XANA considered this proposition. Whether Aelita joined him or not, if she was trapped in the Mirror, that would be one less Lyoko Warrior to contend with when he returned to his throne. Furthermore, the revelations she found there would disturb her emotional and mental states, weakening her.

*Very well. When it does not interfere with our main goal, I will concentrate on finding a way to lure her into the Mirror.*

Accord reached, he cut the connection and hurried to Professor Hertz’s office. He found it locked, but he didn’t believe for a second she’d gone home like the other teachers. Not after the revelations of this afternoon.

XANA extended a single finger and brushed the lock. A spark of electricity jumped; a small electromagnetic field was created; the tumblers were repulsed; the lock was opened. He stepped inside.

The professor wasn’t there.

White-hot rage flared. Part of him was trapped in the Mirror, communication was becoming more difficult, he ran the risk of revealing himself when they *did* communicate, and by his calculations
they would lose complete contact sometime tomorrow. And that meant each half of XANA would be acting on his own, the right hand unable to see what the left was doing. The mere thought made him shudder. He had never faced a situation like that before.

He absolutely had to get as much information to his other half as possible before that happened. That meant finding out what Professor Hertz knew about the codes in the dossier—the codes he’d stolen—so he didn’t have time to play a stupid human game of hide-and-seek!

Striding to the professor’s desk, he placed Eva’s hands on Hertz’s computer. He only needed a few seconds to access the internal school network, and from there, find their security cameras. He flipped through them, searching, searching…

There. The camera in the chemistry lab showed Hertz, using a computer there. XANA left the office, locking the door behind him. He hurried through the building, across the grounds, and into the science laboratories.

As he went, he calculated. It would be easy to use Eva’s body to threaten Hertz. But again, his contact with his other side in the Mirror was limited. Eva may well be his last chance of entering Lyoko. It was paramount he recover his powers; now, more than ever, he could not make a single mistake. After a series of immense mental calculation and matrixes, he decided: interrogating Hertz was the best step to take next, but he should not reveal himself.

Doing his best to look lost and pitiable, he timidly opened the door to the lab Hertz was in. “Professor? Are you in here? I really need to talk to you…”

A side door opened and Hertz stepped out. “Eva? What’s wrong?”

And then XANA realized a detail he’d overlooked. He couldn’t actually ask Hertz about the dossier. She didn’t know that it had disappeared or that Eva had put it back. Informing her of that would raise too many questions, and worse, may make its way back to the Lyoko Warriors.

No. The better option would perhaps be to approach, kiss and possess her. He ran a quick mental simulation.

Analysis of the probability of success: 87%.

Good enough for him.

He made Eva smile weakly and stimulated her tear ducts. He took a deep, shaky breath. “I, um…all this, it’s just been…it’s hard to hear, you know?”

Hertz’s face melted into one of warm sympathy. She was a teacher, after all, and this was an innocent, scared student of hers. XANA took a step closer, holding Eva’s arms out, as if asking for a hug. “And I’m…really scared, and…”

“Professor Hertz!”

Belpois you son of a bitch!

XANA inwardly screamed as Belpois ran into the room. It took every ounce of his self-control to keep his hatred off Eva’s face as she stepped back.

“There you are!” the imbecile said. “Good news—Ulrich’s back, so we can get ready for the conference!”
“That is good news,” Hertz said, smiling and walking past XANA. For a second, he entertained a thought of attacking her and Belpois. Just for a little bit. He wouldn’t even hurt her that much, though Belpois…

But then the foolishness of such a risk reasserted itself, and he reluctantly let the pleasant daydream go. *It’s for the best things turned out this way,* he told himself. *He may have walked in on you possessing the professor, and that would have been disastrous.*

That did nothing to erase the bitter disappointment and frustration, though. All he’d needed was a few more seconds, and the secrets Hertz held would have been his!

Nothing to be done for it. Fuming silently, he followed the pair out of the lab.

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The process of setting up the video-conference took several hours. They cordoned off the chemistry lab for their use, checked that the Green Phoenix had no spy cameras or microphones inside it, and then installed a cryptographic program on the computer they would be using. Then they brought in more equipment—microphones for Hertz and Aelita to speak to Dido, speakers for the others to hear the dialogue.

Aelita looked around. She and Hertz were sitting at the teacher’s desk, facing the monitor. Everyone else was sitting at the student benches, so Dido wouldn’t see them. Jeremie was moving around, making the final checks and sweeps and all that.

It was Wednesday, eight in the evening. So in Washington, it had to be two in the afternoon. Aelita’s heart was beating like a caged bird’s wings. Despite everything she’d been telling herself in preparation for this moment, sour fear coated her tongue.

_This is the woman who hunted my father and me. If it weren’t for her...I could have had a normal life. How am I supposed to look at her without remembering that?_

_Please give me strength to face this._

“We’re ready,” Jeremie said, making some final adjustments to the screen. He stepped away and darted back to his seat. “You’ll be connecting in three...two...one…”

She held her breath, hoping and not hoping Dido was in her office. After several seconds, the image of a woman appeared. She was around Professor Hertz’s age, but unlike the professor, her dirty-blond hair held not the slightest trace of gray. Like the other men in black, she wore a crisp, dark business suit, although in the comfort of her office she had forgone the sunglasses.

“Good evening, Dido,” Professor Hertz said coldly. “We’re here with Walter Stern, who explained to us how to get in contact with you.”

“A pleasure to see you again, Major Steinback,” Dido said with the slightest accented French. Her unsmiling face did not match the words at all. “How long has it been now, thirteen years? And that girl with you…”

Aelita stiffened as Dido’s eyes narrowed. “Why, she looks an awful lot like Hopper’s daughter. Strange. She should be in her mid-twenties by now.”
Instinctively, for a second, she cowered. Dido represented the men in black who had terrorized Aelita her entire life. They had been the monsters under her bed, the cautionary bed-time tales. As a little girl—even today—she had nightmares about suited figures reaching for her with long, spindly fingers. Wolves baying as they chased her through snowy fields. Be careful or the men in black will get you!

Then her mouth thinned and her spine straightened. No more. She refused to be afraid anymore. “Yes, I do. That’s one of the many important things we have to tell you about.”

She and Professor Hertz filled Dido in on everything that had happened since Daddy fled—from their imprisonment in Lyoko to Jeremie’s discovery of the supercomputer, from their fight against XANA to Daddy’s sacrifice, from her search for her mother to Mago’s invasion of the factory.

“These children,” Hertz concluded, “have proved themselves: they found the supercomputer and fought XANA all by themselves. But they’re still children, and these are terrorists who now hold the most dangerous weapon invented. It’ll be in the Green Phoenix’s arsenal if they find a way into Lyoko, and we aren’t equipped to fight them alone.”

Dido rolled a cigarette between her fingers. At some point in their story, she’d withdrawn and lit it up. Now, when she exhaled, smoke furled from her mouth. “Are you thinking of military intervention? The Parisian region has too many citizens. It could be complicated.”

“No,” Aelita said emphatically. She placed her palms on the desk, rose, and shook her head. “We want a peaceful solution. My friends and I know the virtual world by heart, and we’re convinced we could stop the Green Phoenix through Lyoko.”

“How?”

Now was probably not the time to mention they’d been Teleported into the real world to destroy supercomputers, including that space station. “You heard what XANA could do with those towers. One’s only limit is their imagination. We can use them to stop the Green Phoenix. But we’ll need your cooperation to succeed, because we have no way to get to Lyoko right now.

“Stern’s appearance at the Hermitage damaged the access scanner, blocking two of our friends in an isolated digital environment: my father’s journal. We can’t use the scanners at the factory for obvious reasons. And those trinkets in Brussels are much too old for—”

“Ah, yes, Brussels. You do realize you trespassed on government property and assaulted an agent, right, children? You could end up in prison.”

Definitely not the time to mention the space station. “What we want,” she continued, refusing to let herself be intimidated, “is access to the information about the connection to the First City. That way, once we repair the scanner in the Hermitage, we can connect directly to that replica without going to Brussels.”

Dido nodded curtly. “Very well. In exchange, when we’re done with the Green Phoenix, I want to destroy the supercomputer.”

“Fine.” Daddy wanted it destroyed anyway.

The agent’s eyes narrowed, seeming suspicious of Aelita’s easy acquiescence. “What else?”

“Immunity,” Hertz said tightly. “You won’t wipe our memories like I know you plan to.”

A spike of fear slammed into Aelita’s chest, making it hard to breath for a few seconds. She hadn’t
even thought of that. Behind the monitor, her friends’ eyes were all widening, faces contorting with shock and fear. The thought of forgetting them was the worst thing she’d felt since Daddy died.

She didn’t know brown eyes could be cold, but somehow, Dido pulled it off. “I can’t allow Carthage to be recreated, ever. These children already know too much.”

“But ma’am!” Jeremie leapt up and raced around the desk, parking himself in front of the screen. He yanked on a spare microphone. “You can’t!”

“And who are you, young man?”

“Jeremie Belpois, but that’s not important! Aelita already remembers so little of her childhood--if you take away her memories of Lyoko, you’ll take away practically everything else!”

“I feel for her, but it must be done. International security is at stake.”

“Isn’t there a way you could protect the world without hurting her more than you already have?”

Dido’s fine lips thinned. “If she has been hurt by us, it is only as a byproduct of her father’s actions.”

“Exactly! She’s an innocent in all this! You can’t punish her for what Hopper did!”

Hertz added, “Be reasonable, Dido. If you wondered why we didn’t accept your bargain back then-this is it. Not just because of our work, but because we knew you would make no concession for Aelita. Don’t make that same mistake again.”

A heavy pause fell, wherein Dido visibly considered Hertz’s words. Aelita’s heart rate, which had gradually slowed, picked up again, faster than before. Her mouth was a desert. Below the desk, her hands fisted in her skirt. What would they do if Dido still refused? Could they fight without her? But how would they keep the men in black from hunting them again? Ideas and fears spilled out of her mind, like an overflowing cup.

Finally, Dido sighed. “A compromise, then. I will allow you to keep your memories, but I will erase every bit of knowledge you have on Lyoko’s programming codes.”

Jeremie faltered, blinking like an owl. Was it because of shock or reluctance? As soon as the thought crossed her mind, Aelita could have shaken herself. She couldn’t doubt Jeremie.

“Alright,” he said.

See? Aelita told herself. Her locked limbs loosened, tension draining away.

“Excellent. I’m so glad we could reach an agreement. Now, if that’s all…”

“Sorry, but isn’t. There are two final things.” Aelita inhaled. “First, my mother. A man named Mark James Hollenback kidnapped her. I want to find him and rescue her.”

“Well, that first part is easy. He’s the leader of the Green Phoenix, going by the name Hannibal Mago.”

Hope lit up like a beacon inside Aelita. So if we fight the Green Phoenix, we aren’t just protecting the supercomputer. We’ll get closer to rescuing my mother!

“Rescuing Anthea could be trickier, however. Hertz, Hopper, and I all failed to do so, on separate occasions. Mago’s a slippery weasel; he always keeps Anthea by his side. So if he’s here at the
supercomputer now, you’ll probably find her. Getting her out, on the other hand…”

Aelita’s breath caught. *Mommy might be with Mago? Then...she might be right here*, in this same city. In the factory. She seemed so close and impossibly far, at the same time.

With a deep, shaky breath, she forced her emotions under control. “Last is about a dossier Professor Hertz here has.” Out of the corner of Aelita’s eye, she saw Hertz start--they hadn’t told her about their discovery. “It’s full of codes we haven’t managed to decipher. Perhaps someone among you can work out what they’re for.”

“No need, I know what they are,” Hertz said, recovering. “Waldo and I prepared them together. It’s called Code Down, a definitive weapon to destroy Lyoko and the First City once and for all.”

Aelita frowned. She had to admit, she’d hoped the codes might have been able to help them reclaim the factory somehow...

At that moment, Eva, face ashen, leapt up and ran out of the lab.

---

XANA paced the hall in huge strides. *Walking to calm down = another pointless human habit.* He really had to do something about this.

Eva’s breath was coming in harsh pants. More disgusting sweat slid down her forehead and under her arms. The force of the rage and fear rippling through him actually made Eva’s whole body tremble.

A weapon. Not one he could use, but one that threatened him entirely. It would rip away Lyoko and the First City. He would be powerless again. He would be *weak* again. Living at the mercy of other people.

He could not go through that again. He *would not* go through that again.

Behind him, the door opened. Aelita stepped out, looking at him with concern. “Are you alright, Eva? You left so suddenly…”

Her concern warmed something he’d tried to kill, and XANA inwardly growled. This was beyond ridiculous. “Yeah, I just...felt really nauseous for a second. But it’s gone now.” *Use sleight of hand; distract.* “How are the negotiations going?”

“They were going well when I stepped out,” Aelita answered. “I’m pretty sure Dido will give us a hand as long as the Green Phoenix are in town.”

“That’s right,” Belpois said, stepping out. The rest of their little gang followed. “We’ve agreed on terms. We’ll work together to defeat the Green Phoenix and rescue Anthea. Dido will let us keep our memories and fix her and Aelita’s paperwork so they can live in peace. In exchange, we’ll let her destroy the supercomputer and every bit of Hopper’s notes.”

Ah yes, *that* wonderful development.

“Before we ended the call, she gave me the access codes to the First City. As soon as we repair the
scanner, we can send a team there and find what Hopper has hidden.”

Aelita stepped forward. “I’d still like to see the Mirror.”

*Finally* something was going right. He didn’t have to do anything to push Aelita into the Mirror; she was ready to offer herself up as the sacrificial lamb on her own. “Yeah, you should. This is your dad’s journal, after all.”

Forcing himself to sound casual, he added, “By the way, what about that Code Down thing? Is Dido gonna use that to destroy the supercomputer?”

“I don’t know,” Hertz said, rubbing her eyes. “I don’t think she has it, but Code Down is still a long story. We’ll talk about it tomorrow. For now, let’s get some sleep.”

Nods were going around, so grudgingly XANA gave up. He’d really rather find out all about it now, but it’d look suspicious if he pushed. He’d have to be patient. Besides, the knowledge that he would finally enter the First City tomorrow would guarantee a good night’s sleep.

He gave himself a mental shake. *You’re an artificial intelligence. You don’t need sleep—and you certainly don’t need to enjoy it!*

Sleep was something he’d never experienced before possessing Eva. He functioned at every hour of every day. The idea of just *shutting down*, even temporarily, had been...he wouldn’t say frightening, but unpleasant. Unfortunately, this flimsy vessel of his needed sleep, so it was something he was forced to endure. The fact it left his vessel feeling refreshed meant nothing.

Nothing at all.

---

There was no way out of the Mirror. Even when he reached the end, it didn’t send him back to the real world. He was trapped.

And XANA was alive. XANA was hunting him.

He still hadn’t been able to process either of those. He was too busy for that.

William stumbled out of the latest ‘system update’ and braced his hands against his knees, sucking in great gasps of air. He had seconds--mere seconds--before XANA followed him here and he had to run again. He hated it with every fiber of his being--hated not being able to destroy that evil thing, hated leaving Odd with it--but he didn’t have another choice. He couldn’t fight XANA. He couldn’t outsmart XANA. He couldn’t escape XANA. All he could do was stay alive and wait for rescue.

His entire body ached. He was exhausted. He had no idea how long he’d been here. He’d lost track of time. Seconds, minutes, hours, they blurred together in a stream of locations and people speeding past his eyes. His stomach had long ago been turned inside-out.

His fingers clenched around the remote like it was a life preserver. That wasn’t too far off. It was never out of hand. He hadn’t even had time to explore if he could do anything else with it--
With the sound of shattering glass, XANA stepped out of the air next to him. He turned and smiled far, far too widely.

Swearing, William’s finger stabbed the rewind button--

And he was not thrust into the whirling maelstrom of teleportation.

He glanced at the remote, puzzled. Dropped it with a shout. On the screen where the date was usually displayed, the numbers and words had been wiped away. In their place was a glowing red Eye.

And then he was tackled. They flew threw the Hermitage’s attic wall and outside. William had just enough time to wonder, *Odd’s best at range. Why is he up close?!,* before they were falling and all cognitive thought washed away.

He wrestled against XANA, jabbing him with an elbow, taking a foot to the gut. They struggled in mid-air, each trying to flip the other beneath them. Air whooshed around William’s ears--

He gasped as he collided with the ground, sending a sledgehammer smashing into his spine. Claws pierced his shoulders in sharp little pinpricks. XANA pinned him down and started to lean in. Bits of smoke trailed out of his mouth.

William slammed his head into XANA’s. Pain erupted along his forehead and stars winked before his eyes. XANA reeled back, actually looking kind of shocked. William’s mind caught up with the present. *Smoke. Smoke! I’m an idiot!*

As XANA collected himself, William turned into smoke and streaked away.
Act III Chapter VII: The Next Strike

Chapter Notes

A/N: Apologies for not updating last week, I had a bit of writer’s block. But it’s passed and now we should be back to our regular schedule!

Friday’s morning sun skimmed warm fingers over the ground, causing the snow to sparkle like diamonds. The bare branches of the trees glittered with fresh icicles. Silence blanketed everything, the usual bustle of Kadic closed behind classrooms and schoolwork.

As they walked along Kadic’s main road, Jim glanced at the boy next to him. “Why does it have to be me, specifically?”

“Professor Hertz asked you to,” Jeremie responded promptly.

“Ok, but why aren’t you and Aelita and all your friends in class like everyone else?”

“I told you, Professor Hertz spoke with Principal Delmas about excusing us from classes for a few days.”

Jim *hmphed*. “Well, ‘extracurricular science activity’ seems awfully vague.”

Jeremie just shrugged and shoved his hands in his pockets. It was *true*, technically. Still, he didn’t want to test how long it would hold water. The sooner they fixed the scanner, the better.

He and Professor Hertz had tried, yesterday, but found it beyond their capabilities. So they’d decided to bring in ‘the old team’--his father and Yumi’s parents--for more help. Dido had agreed to lend them one of the men in black’s memory-machines, having confiscated Hertz’s, and an agent had dropped it off last night. All Hertz had to do was use it to reverse the amnesia.

As he walked with Jim to meet them at the gate, Jeremie inhaled, drinking in the crisp scent of snow and yesterday night’s rain. Things he took for granted, almost never noticed. But these senses were so precious to Aelita. He could still remember her excitement the first time she was virtualized on Earth, how new she’d found everything…the way she treated something as mundane as the texture of a leaf as something to be treasured...

His mind drifted, from pleasant thoughts of Aelita back to another pair trapped in a virtual world.

Today marked their third day inside the Mirror. He didn’t want to worry the others, but he was concerned about Odd and William. Barring Aelita and cases of possession, none of them had been virtualized for this long. There was no telling what kind of impact it could have on them. And being in a foreign virtual world just added to the possible problems. Were the rules like Lyoko, or were they experiencing genuine hunger and thirst? Was time flowing differently for them? Would there be some sort of whiplash when they returned?

*And that’s assuming they’re still alive…*

He shook his head quickly, as if the thought was a fly that could be dispelled. Odd was wily and William was stubborn as a mule. They’d be fine. What he should be worrying about was getting
them back before their absences became conspicuous.

When they were about to reach the gate, Jim stopped suddenly. “Hey, uh... you sure everything’s alright, Jeremie?”

“Of course,” he said automatically, the lie as easy as breathing. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Well, you just haven’t dropped by for training at all these past few weeks, is all.”

Ah, yes. He had taken up some physical exercises with Jim during their battle against XANA, figuring it couldn’t hurt to be in better shape. After XANA was dead, Jeremie had kept up with a loose training regimen, mostly for the health benefits. But with everything that had been going on, with the men in black and the Green Phoenix and looking for Aelita’s mom, it had dropped to the back burner. “I’ve been busy.”

But that just made Jim frown. “You mean like you were for the past two years?”

“Ah…”

“And, if I’m not mistaken, those are bags under your eyes. Don’t tell me you’re up to something sneaky again!”

“Firstly, I’ve never been up to anything sneaky. Secondly, you’re overreacting,” Jeremie said. “A few stressful weeks aren’t anything to get worked up over.”

“They are when it leads to you neglecting your health! You were well on the path to a hermit last year, and as your teacher it’s my job to keep you on the straight and narrow.”

A huff of frustrated air left Jeremie’s lips. It was touching, he supposed, that Jim was concerned about him, but really, this wasn’t an opportune time. “Well, thank you, but my friends have already warned me about neglecting myself. Now shall we turn back to the task at hand?”

Without letting Jim respond, he hurried to the front gate. Takeho and Akiko Ishiyama were already waiting--of course, they lived close by. With one last skeptical glance at Jeremie, Jim moved to greet them.

Jeremie chewed the inside of his lip, eyeing the Ishiyamas critically. According to Hertz, they had been responsible for the creation of the scanners--the logic circuits, the arm of the transformer, the motherboard, all that. With repairing the fried motherboard impossible, they hoped to get the Ishiyamas to create a new one. Even with Hertz’s assurances they could, he found himself skeptical.

And then there was his father, who had just stepped out of his car.

No matter how Jeremie tried, he couldn’t wrap his head around what Professor Hertz had revealed. His father, once working alongside Professor Hopper? Oh, he had the programming skills, certainly--but all Jeremie’s life, he’d always been so...open. Honest. Surely if he’d been capable of the secrecy for Hopper’s work, Jeremie would have known.

But then again, he supposed the same could be said about him.

His throat squeezed shut as Dad approached. Suddenly, he found himself remembering moments from his childhood--Dad teaching him how to program, Dad taking him to pick out his first pair of eyeglasses, Dad buying him his first laptop.
Was that man...a lie?

No, that was ridiculous. It wasn’t like Dad had lied to him, not knowingly. And surely Mom wouldn’t have married him if he’d been anything but the man he had been all Jeremie’s life.

Still, he wanted to run to his father, embrace him, demand all kinds of answers--and even confide his fears. Jeremie restrained himself. He wasn’t a child. “Hey, Dad,” he said.

Dad smiled and hugged him anyway. “Hey, Jeremie. How’ve you been?”

“Good. You?”

“Good. Mom sends a hug and kiss.” Dad’s easy-going smile faded a little, a serious expression replacing it. “Is something wrong, Jeremie? Your professor called me here all of a sudden, and you’re not in class…”

Jeremie pushed his glasses up his nose and cast a quick glance at the Ishiyamas. “Well, it’s not like something’s wrong, exactly…she just needed to speak with you and the Ishiyamas about something, as soon as possible.”

“Well, I guess we shouldn’t keep her waiting, then.”

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In the two days he’d been here, Hannibal had grown to despise the factory. It was a living safety hazard, with its old cables and creaky stairs and out-of-date elevators. But even worse, it didn’t have running water. And even with his army cleaning the place up, there was still a thick enough layer of dust to cause him to explode into sneezes. As soon as it was feasible, he was going to call someone to get this...this hovel into proper shape.

Hannibal’s childhood had lacked privilege; he’d come from a very poor family with too many siblings to look after. Every day was a fight to survive, and he would have lost eventually unless he got out. That out was lying about his age to enlist in the army as soon as possible, and he’d never looked back. This place reminded him of that poverty, something he found intolerable. He found himself fantasizing about the soft beds of five-star hotels, the richest wines and rarest steaks, his private collection of priceless art and jewels...

“Sir, may we enter?”

Splashing a last bit of water on his face, Hannibal looked up from the dish and studied his appearance in the mirror. All traces of dirt were wiped away, his hair was well-combed, his suit immaculate. “Come in,” he called.

Hera and Grigory obeyed. They stood, posture straight, as he settled on his comfortable cushions.

“Well Hera,” Hannibal said, lacing his fingers. “I hope you have something for me today.”

Yesterday morning, she’d reported the discovery of a second diary in the supercomputer--one belonging to a boy named Jeremie Belpois. Hannibal had told her to leave that one alone and focus on Franz Hopper’s, but it was massive and spanned many years. One evening hadn’t been enough for her to find what Hannibal was looking for; it was his hope that another day would prove more
“Yes, sir. I left the Belpois diary alone as you ordered, and spent all of yesterday reading through Hopper’s. I made excellent progress, and discovered several interesting experiments he conducted and projects he created.”

Hera handed him a folder with some sheets of paper. “Here are my notes on the ones that seemed particularly prospective. Things like a neural headset to increase your intelligence or a cutting-edge multi-agent system. If the Green Phoenix could mass-produce and sell these, it would bring great monetary gain.”

He leafed through the papers quickly. Hera’s notes were detailed in small, neat handwriting that crammed the pages full to the brim. He nodded to himself. Something to read through for a later date. “Did you find anything to solve our virtualization problem?”

Hera hesitated.

“Hera,” he said, in a voice like sheathed steel. “Don’t make me hurt you. Just answer honestly.”

She glanced at the rings on his fingers. Touched her cheek. Averted her eyes. When she spoke, reluctance dragged the words out. “It...seems as if children can be virtualized successfully onto Lyoko.”

Rising from his cushions, he stepped very close to her and patted her cheek. “There, that wasn’t so hard, was it?”

Hera shrank a little. When he returned to his seat, Grigory spoke up. “Permission to speak, sir?”

Hannibal glanced at Grigory. His narrow face was thoughtful, his pale eyes intense--like a snake preparing to strike. Grigory wasn’t one to speak idly or foolishly. In the past, his suggestions were reliable. He tilted his chin. “Go ahead.”

“I didn’t remember until Hera mentioned kids, but those brats told their friends they’ve been able to go into the supercomputer. As well as one adult, Professor Hopper. He brought his daughter with him; that’s why she’s still a teenager.”

Hannibal inhaled sharply. He didn’t care about Hopper’s offspring. All he cared about was that they’d found Hopper. “Are you saying he’s in there right now?! If we could rematerialize him, I can force him to help--”

“No. Those kids said they fought some kind of AI that killed the professor.”

“Fantastic,” Hannibal grumbled, slouching in his cushions.

But no. Not all the news was bad. Look on the bright side--now he knew entering Lyoko had been done. He smiled. “Well, if children can enter Lyoko...all we need to do is kidnap one.” Children were easy to manipulate. Threaten mommy and daddy and they’d cry their eyes out--but they’d obey.

Hera shifted, looking uncomfortable, but Grigory hadn’t batted an eye. He was nodding, in fact. “I recommend Jeremie Belpois, the author of that second diary. From my surveillance, he’s another genius in the making, and he seems to be in charge. If we take him, we not only remove their boss, we remove a boy who was able to set up a top-level closed-circuit surveillance system in one day.”
Hannibal whistled. “Impressive. Perhaps we’ll have to keep him, if he survives.” Recruitment wasn’t on the top of his agenda right now...but as they say, keep your friends close, and your enemies closer.

The more he thought about it, the more he liked it. “Yes. Excellent idea, Grigory. Bring me that boy tonight.”

“Yes, sir.”

---

When Professor Hertz’s office door opened, Jeremie leapt to his feet. The professor emerged, Mr. Belpois clutching her arm with shaking fingers. “Dad! How are you? Do you…”

“A bit overwhelmed by my memories and what Suzanne told me, but fine,” Mr. Belpois said, smiling weakly. Hertz guided him to one of the chairs that had been set up in the hallway, where Ulrich and the rest of the Lyoko Warriors were waiting. He sank into a seat, his son at his side. “But you...I never knew what you went through. I’m so sorry…”

His voice trailing off, he pulled Jeremie into a hug. Professor Hertz gave the assembled teenagers a meaningful look, and they rose in unity and hurried away to give father and son some privacy. Yumi and her parents had already left earlier, planning to catch up at home and then meet them at the Hermitage.

As he trudged away, hands in pockets, Ulrich glanced back at the scene with not an insignificant amount of envy. Mr. Belpois was speaking too quietly to hear, but the look on his face told Ulrich everything he needed to know--he was proud of his son for fighting XANA, regretful he couldn’t help, glad he could now.

Why couldn’t his fa--Walter have been like that?

Stop, he told himself. You don’t care anymore.

He didn’t. He was done with Walter. Done with the pressure and trying to change himself for someone who never appreciated it. Done with trying to please a man who’d betrayed his own friend because ‘staying friends would hold him back’. He meant that.

But there was an empty part of him that should have been filled with a father’s love; just because he told it to stop aching didn’t make it happen overnight.

A small hand skimmed across his arm. “Ulrich? Are you okay?”

He flinched away. Aelita.

He’d been avoiding her since he’d learned what Walter did. Even if she didn’t hate him for it...how could he not hate himself? That man’s filthy blood flowed through Ulrich’s veins. It made him feel tainted. Unclean.

If Walter wasn’t worthy to stand in her presence--and he wasn’t--then neither was Ulrich.

“Ulrich?”
He realized she was probably waiting for an answer. “Yeah. I’m fine.” There. Done. He picked up the pace, trying to shake Aelita. Maybe he could crash in his room for a bit before they all went back to the Hermitage--

“Then why won’t you look at me? Why haven’t you looked at me for the past few days?”

He sucked in a pained breath. Go away, Aelita.

“Is it because of your father?”

His temper flared. Ulrich wheeled around. “That man is not my father.”

The sudden movement made Aelita stumble back; air whistled as his swinging arm almost smacked her in the face. He froze. Aelita’s hand was extended out, as if to touch his shoulder. Her eyes were wide at the fury he knew must be etched on his face. Her hand pulled back a little.

Ulrich recoiled. He wasn’t angry at her, not really. He hadn’t meant to scare or almost hurt her. “I…I’m sorry, Aelita. I just…”

Why was it so hard to talk about personal things with other people?! Why couldn’t he control this--this anger, whenever his buttons got pressed? Why did he always have to hurt people?

I am just like Walter.

He hung his head.

Slim arms wrapped around him. He blinked and found himself looking down at Aelita’s head of pink hair. She squeezed him gently and stepped back. “It’s okay. I should have known better than to push you when you’re like this.”

‘Like this’. He snorted. That was a polite way of saying he was a broody mess.

“I’ll leave you alone. But I just want you to...you’re one of my best friends. You’ve saved my life more times than I can count. And frankly, you’re worth a million of Walter. Never doubt that.”

Finally, he looked into her face. Her green eyes held no hate or blame, just compassion.

It took him a moment to swallow the lump in his throat. “I’m trying. To believe that, I mean.”

She smiled. “Good.”

As she began to move away, Ulrich suddenly felt an impulse to not be alone, as he’d originally planned. “Do you mind if I walk you to the Hermitage?”

She turned, and feeling foolish, he clarified, “You never know who might be around.”

“True,” she said, and he relaxed. “Let me call Eva, and then let’s go rescue our friends.”

---

Sissi poked listlessly at her penne pasta, cheek resting in hand. Sunlight spilled through the cafeteria windows and slanted across the floor. Conversations about tomorrow’s half-day and plans
for Saturday afternoon drifted to her ears. All around her, students were laughing, talking, eating.

And then there was her. In a dark corner, alone.

Again.

She should be happy about that Milly had stopped pestering her about her ‘break-up’ with William (seriously, when did they start dating?) and that the Twin Wonders weren’t around, but instead a black hole yawned in her chest.

What’s wrong with me? She thought. What’s so wrong with me that none of my friends will include me?

Her eyes, of their own accord, drifted towards their usual table. It was completely empty—as it had been yesterday.

Probably off doing more secret-club stuff, she thought bitterly.

Not that she cared. When she’d retreated to nurse her wounded heart, she’d decided she was done with them. Really done, this time. Ulrich was happily dating Yumi. William had been quick to rub shoulders with the people who’d spurned him. And if Eva--Eva, who was such a newcomer--could be privy to their little secret, and Sissi couldn’t...then it was obviously something about her personally that made them exclude her.

Which brought her back to her original thought: what was wrong with her? Why wasn’t she good enough? She’d tried to change. She’d stepped in whenever Jeremie got bullied. Went shopping with Yumi and Aelita. Befriended William when he was alone. Why wasn’t it good enough?

It was tempting to say, well, if it’s not good enough, why bother? and fall back into her bitch persona. If she couldn’t be happy, why should anyone else?

But that felt like...she wasn’t sure. Letting her so-called friends have too much power over her life. Like they could dictate her mood, her personality, and her future. And that was so not gonna happen. Besides, she liked being nicer.

If only being nicer meant she was no longer alone.

---

It was irritating, XANA had to admit, that he hadn’t possessed William again by now. He had no idea how close the Lyoko Warriors were to breaching the Mirror, and he really would rather have William under his metaphorical thumb before then.

Still, if William wanted to run so much, fine. XANA would just ensure he never got the chance to rest.

He’d kept an internal clock functioning, and he knew it was now approaching seventy-two hours since they’d been trapped here. Seventy-two hours since William had last slept. His body may not exist for him to need to eat or sleep, but his brain did. His brain required sleep, and it wasn’t getting it.
Having hacked the Mirror’s system, it was easy for XANA to stay on the trail of William’s smoke form. He was lightly jogging after it now, passing by the Arc de Triomphe. On June 4th, 1994, the time now was six in the morning. The streets were mostly empty, and the few people around rushed from cover to cover or collected under umbrellas. Gray clouds rumbled in the sky, while sheets of rain slicked Odd’s hair to his scalp.

XANA had never felt rain before. He didn’t think highly of the experience. It was warm, wet, obscured his vision, and could potentially damage a computer. Still, even with water dripping into his eyes, he didn’t lose sight of the smoke winding across the ground.

Paradoxically, it looked like it was falling apart. Instead of rushing around at high speeds, it was sluggish. It couldn’t execute sharp turns anymore. It was more solid--there were even occasions where William faltered and his avatar’s human shape would stumble out, only to melt back in the next heartbeat.

Soon enough, he would be too tired to concentrate on maintaining his smoke form at all. He may have been forcing back his need for sleep, but he was only human. He had limits, was bound to basic human weakness. He would collapse from exhaustion sooner or later. And when he did, XANA would strike.

It wouldn’t be long now.
After a long afternoon of hard work, the parents had been able to reassemble the scanner. Mr. Ishiyama had examined the motherboard and declared that the fuses saved the most delicate parts; the only repairs needed was taking parts from Odd’s laptop. Mrs. Ishiyama had tackled fixing the scanner’s mechanical arm; Belpois, his father, and Hertz all provided assistance as needed. The rest of the teens and Richard had been reduced to runner duties, fetching food, water, and necessary supplies.

XANA had kept an eye on the parents as they worked. Although they’d been part of Hopper’s team, he’d rarely interacted with them. When they were in the lab, he was usually with Aelita and thus had no interest in speaking with them. Still, he carefully evaluated all personality traits and relationships for potential use in the future. Their knowledge wasn’t as potentially dangerous to him as Belpois or Code Down, but he would be a fool to dismiss them. After all, they were turning what would have been days or weeks worth of work into an afternoon’s.

By eight in the evening, everything was done and the whole group gathered in the second secret room to discuss their next step. “So what’s the plan, son?” Belpois’s father asked.

“First, we’re going to send Aelita in the Mirror to check on William and Odd. If they want to leave--and who wouldn’t--we’ll pull them out, and let Aelita explore the contents. Then Ulrich and Yumi will go to the First City to track down Hopper’s recording.”

No. That wouldn’t do at all. XANA had to be in the team for the First City, and Aelita could not be sent to the Mirror first. If she was...if his other half hadn’t neutralized William...if she was isolated while there were warriors available to go after her…

Too many if s, all of which would lead to the same end: failure for his mission. That was unacceptable.

He pushed his vessel to her feet and cleared her throat. “I know we’re all worried about Odd and William, but the Green Phoenix are probably in the factory, trying to get into Lyoko and the First City, at this very moment. I think our priority should be sending warriors there to evaluate the situation and protect the city, if possible.”

“Are you volunteering?” Yumi asked, eyes narrowed.

He flashed a grin. “Of course. You guys have all these people to help with technology...you don’t need me for that anymore. So I want to help the only other way I can.”

Hertz rubbed her chin. “You raise a good point, Eva. I don’t mean to dismiss Odd and William’s well-being, because I am concerned about them--but I don’t believe Waldo would include anything dangerous in his journal. The Green Phoenix are a dire, more critical threat.”

Mrs. Ishiyama’s fingers squeezed her daughter’s arm. “But...I can’t just send Yumi into danger!”

“Mom...I’ve fought XANA tons of times. I’ll be fine.”

Meanwhile, Ulrich’s father was hissing at his son in low, angry tones. The boy glared and snapped something back. XANA had no wish to eavesdrop on them or the Ishiyamas, who were now
fussing over their daughter. It likely had no import to him.

Turning away, XANA happened to catch sight of Aelita. She was watching Yumi and her parents, a wistful expression on her face.

An uncomfortable sensation crept over him, watching her watching them. Something tight and deep, wrapping around Eva’s heart like a thorny vine. He rubbed his vessel’s chest, grimacing.

Whatever this oddity was, he didn’t like it. Worse, he’d felt it before. When Belpois’ and Yumi’s parents had regained their memories and hugged their offspring, he’d noticed this same look on Aelita’s face. This exact same reaction had happened. A glitch occurring once was a mild annoyance; a recurrence was a cause for mild alarm.

I must figure out a way to eliminate it.

He began analyzing the source. Both times, it had occurred because of Aelita, but only when he saw a specific look on her face. That look had been of wistfulness. What put that look there? Understanding that was paramount to understanding this bug. The direction of her stare indicated that longing was directed at Yumi and Belpois’ parents…

No, likely not their parents. A greater probability was she coveted the idea of parents and the ‘warmth’ they evoked. Well, that was logical; she didn’t know where her mother was, and her father was...

Dead.

XANA froze, the circuits in his electronic brain lighting up with understanding.

Her father was dead. He had killed her father. Aelita longed for her father. Something uncomfortable crept upon him when he saw her longing.

No. No, he absolutely would not acknowledge this. Hopper deserved to die! He, XANA, was in the right! He shoved that emotion deep in his safe, with the rest of the other useless emotions he’d buried. He didn’t even bother to give it a name, because it was trifling. Trivial. He was so close to returning to Lyoko, and once he shed this vessel and all its human flaws, he would never be bothered by such weakness again.

---

“Alright, Eva,” Belpois said, settling behind the chair. “This might feel a little strange. Just relax.”

Taking advantage of Yumi’s and Ulrich’s distraction, XANA had entered the scanner first. He kept every bit of emotion from Eva’s face. He was so close. So close he could taste it. To be stopped now would be ruinous.

The computer here hadn’t detected any anomalies in Odd--perhaps because it wasn’t as sophisticated as the one in the lab. It stood to reason it wouldn’t detect him in Eva. Still...he wasn’t taking any chances.

The doors of the scanner closed. The interior was so smooth and well-polished, XANA could see the face of his vessel in them. This was the last time he would ever see it. Soon, he would regain
his true form.

“Transfer...Eva! Scanner...Eva!”

Wind blasted his face, throwing Eva’s hair back. He squeezed her eyes shut. The gust was so strong it lifted XANA several inches off the floor. And even through Eva’s eyelids, light battered his vessel’s retinas.

“Virtualization!”

The sound of rushing air filled his ears, and then suddenly, silence fell. He opened Eva’s eyes.

All around him were the skyscrapers, blue-roofed pagodas, and colorful roads of the First City. It hadn’t fared well in his absence; the once-clean streets were covered in grime, the paper lanterns dangling from the houses were unlit and torn, and the glass in many windows had been smashed.

Dropping out of the air, XANA landed easily on Eva’s feet. He couldn’t stop staring at the scenery around him. For a moment, another strange feeling almost overwhelmed him. He reached out to brush the bricks of a nearby house. With soft hum, they started to part for him; he quickly yanked his hand back in case anyone outside was watching.

Still, he smiled.

Vessel or no vessel, the city knew and welcomed its master.

This place had been, all at once, his prison, his weapon, and as close to home as he could ever describe. When he’d escaped the supercomputer, he’d been glad to be free of his tethers. But now...it was good to be back.

An ‘oof!’ behind him drew his attention. Ulrich had just been virtualized and landed soundly on his feet. The boy rose, fingers reaching for a non-existent sword by habit. The line of his mouth tightened when he grabbed air.

He stopped short when he saw XANA. For a moment, the AI froze, wondering if some glitch had revealed his possession. But then he studied Ulrich’s face. The boy didn’t look horrified or defensive; he was blinking very rapidly, face contorting as if to fight a smile. “Eva, you, uh…you look....colorful.”

At first, XANA didn’t quite understand. Then he looked down at his vessel’s avatar.

Outwardly, Eva’s facial expression didn’t change. Inwardly, XANA closed his eyes and grimaced.

Aesthetics weren’t something he considered important. Attractiveness was a tool to be cultivated, like he had with Eva, and ignored otherwise. If his monsters’ designs were efficient, he didn’t care if they were considered ugly. But even he had limits to what he would deign to look at, and this...garb was far beyond what he considered acceptable.

The girl’s pants were a painful fluorescent green. The jacket? Bright yellow and covered in the rose logo of that singer she liked--Gardenia, Eva’s memories helpfully supplied. He wasn’t sure whether the black boots dulled the colors a little or whether the contrast made them even worse.

Why couldn’t his host’s inner self have been a policewoman? A princess? Anything other than this?

*You won’t have to put up with this garishness for long,* XANA reminded himself. The First City
and Lyoko were within his grasp. He wouldn’t need this shell then. He supposed he wouldn’t hurt her, she had been adequate as a vessel, but he would be perfectly happy to never look upon this abominable combination of colors ever again.

“Thanks,” he muttered.

Yumi landed in the next moment, took one look at Eva, and started snickering. “I’m sorry,” she said, not sounding sorry at all, when he glowered. “That’s just...really bright.”

Before he could retort, static crackled. “Everything look good, guys?”

Yumi glanced up at the sky, even though Belpois wasn’t really there. “We’re good, and reading you loud and clear.”

“Good. I’ve got to go virtualize Aelita into the Mirror, so our communication is going to be cut short for a bit. But we’ll talk later.”

“Gotcha.” There was a small click, and then silence.

“So how are we going to find that park again?” Ulrich said to no one in particular.

XANA was already moving further into the city. “We’ll take a tour.”

“Alright, but let’s be careful. Those monsters last time really packed a punch.”

The AI lowered his head to hide his smirk. As if he had anything to fear from his allies.

---

XANA sensed it the minute the scanners returned online. One moment, the data stream that fed into the process of virtualization and materialization was clogged--the next, the static was cleared. There had been a tiny spark in the back of his consciousness as his other half slipped him a bit of information. *First City in T-minus three minutes. Aelita alone to Mirror afterwards.* Then he’d retreated, not daring to maintain contact longer than necessary.

XANA shook with rage. “Well,” he said to the smoke that was still chugging along the ground, “I admit, I’m impressed you managed to evade me this long. Most humans’ bodies would automatically shut down after seventy-two hours of sleep deprivation.”

All William had to do was succumb to sleep! He’d fall out of the smoke and XANA could have possessed him. He’d have been able to pretend nothing was wrong when the Lyoko Warriors checked in. They would have been none the wiser to his return! Aelita would arrive, he’d cut the Mirror off again, and he’d have three Lyoko Warriors isolated and neutralized.

But now he was out of time. He had to re-evaluate his plan, and quickly.

XANA mentally divided himself into three parts. One group, the smallest, kept an eye on William. The second monitored the scanner’s uses--three times as the others went to the First City, then Aelita would be the fourth--and the rest analyzed his opponents’ moves. Would Belpois try to contact Odd and William in the Mirror first?

*Processing...89% chance yes.*
If he didn’t, what then?

*Action on my part will be unnecessary until Aelita arrives.*

When she was here, should he cut Belpois off immediately? No, that might raise both their alarms. Pretend only Odd’s audio worked? No, that would raise even more suspicion.

Closing his eyes, XANA concentrated on the static interference he had raised around the visual and auditory functions of the Mirror. He waited, monitoring both it and the scanners until--

There. Signals attempting to patch through. Carefully, very carefully, he allowed a small hole through the interference with Odd’s audio.

“--me? Odd, William, can either--you hear--?”

XANA studied William. No sign of recognition, although smoke didn't allow for many visual or physical tells. Well, it didn't matter if he heard Belpois or only realized what was happening when XANA spoke. XANA controlled what was heard and seen.

He opened Odd’s mouth. “Jeremie? Is that you?”

“Odd!” *And Aelita, too. Excellent.*

With his expert manipulation, he introduced garble back into the audio. XANA carefully ensured the most important parts of his chosen lie got through, while keeping up the illusion that some unknown source was preventing them from seeing what was really happening--or hearing William. “Guys, som--wrong with Will--and we’re kinda stuck at this part--”

And then he closed the hole, allowing the interference free reign again. XANA exhaled softly, as if letting out stress. Then he grimaced--pointless human habits.

He practically vibrated in place as he waited for the transmission signifying that a transfer was beginning. It had already gone by once, twice, thrice. Even if Aelita didn’t arrive, his other goal had been fulfilled--his other self was in the Mirror. Power would be his again. But if he couldn’t speak with Aelita…

XANA stopped. Grinned. The scanner was being used.

Aelita was coming.

---

Dido and Professor Hertz--or rather, Major Steinback--looked so much younger. The latter, not as young as she had in the earlier parts of the Mirror, but there was definitely still some brown in her hair. Aelita had seen her teacher walking down the road near the spot she materialized and instantly followed her.

As Dido presented her ultimatum--hand over the supercomputer in exchange for a peaceful life--a control box fell out of the sky and bonked Aelita on the head. She knelt and picked it up.

“According to the computer,” Jeremie said, “You’ve just made contact with the Mirror’s navigation interface. It’s telling me that it’s an interaction system that allows you to touch and use
Aelita stepped outside, drinking in the scents of flowers on the café’s windowsill, gas from passing cars, and freshly baked croissants from the bakery down the street. Like the other parts of Daddy’s journal, this virtual world was so lifelike, it momentarily took her breath away.

*If only Lyoko had been like this...* Her imprisonment there wouldn’t have been nearly as bad if she’d had all five senses. “You said they’re on June 4th, right?”

“Yes. They aren’t at a particular memory, so you’re going to have to fast-forward and then enter free exploration to find them.”

And she did just that. New scenes formed and dissolved around her at a dizzying rate—the Hermitage’s garden, inside the Hermitage, the factory. Ghosts moved around her, speaking in distorted and echoing voices. Her stomach lurched. She had to close her eyes to keep her food down.

“You’re there,” Jeremie said after an eternity had passed.

She took her finger off fast-forward and immediately turned on her heel. There was no point in seeing this memory without understanding all the context. Still, the scenery offered clues; she was in the factory. Daddy was walking to the elevator, a briefcase in hand. Resisting the urge to go to him, Aelita hurried outside.

She cupped her hands around her mouth. “Odd? William? Can either of you hear me?”

“It’s no good to yell, Aelita. All of Paris has been recreated--they could be anywhere.”

“Then how am I supposed to find them?”

“I still don’t have video or audio, but I can still track their location through the Mirror. Right now, they’re on Champs-Élysées, moving away from the Arc de Triomphe.”

Aelita set off, passing through crowds of people. There were puddles on the sidewalks, water sluicing off buildings, and the scent of rain in the air. Whatever storm had been around earlier had passed now--there were broken spots of blue sky through the clouds and weak sunlight skimming the ground.

After several minutes of following Jeremie’s instructions, she rounded the corner of Champs-Élysées and saw a familiar purple shape. Odd was strolling past the theaters and cafes, staring at…

Smoke?

“William?”

As if in answer, the smoke swiftly spiraled upwards into a humanoid form. Aelita gasped. William looked *awful*—his skin was pale as a corpse’s, and blue-black bruises spread under his wild eyes. “Aelita! XANA’s alive and possessed Odd! We need to stop him!”

She froze.

*No.*

XANA? No. He couldn’t be alive. Her father’s death couldn’t have been in vain. This couldn’t…
Odd rolled his eyes. “See what I mean about something being wrong? I think the program did something to him; he just started refusing to sleep.”

“This isn’t the time for jokes, William!” Jeremie chided.

“I wouldn’t joke about this!” A yawn snipped off the end of his words.

“And now look at him. He’s a wreck!”

“If you don’t believe me, try rematerializing Aelita.” William crossed his arms. He was swaying in his spot. Aelita stared at him in concern.

“What is that supposed to prove?”

“That XANA is alive and trying to get his hands on her again! He’s the cause of the interference!”

A scoff. “Preposterous. XANA has never been able to interfere with--”

“Just trust me, please! If I’m wrong, it’ll only take a couple seconds to send her back in!”

Jeremie’s sigh crackled in Aelita’s ear. “Fine, fine. Re--”

His voice disappeared.

“Jeremie?”

“You’re really irritating, Dunbar,” Odd said in a low, metallic voice.

Aelita gasped and whirled. A dark scowl had crossed his usually jovial features. Cold fear crawled across her skin like centipede legs. She inched closer to William. “Odd…? If this is a joke, it’s not funny.”

“It’s XANA,” William insisted. “Don’t you think it’s a huge coincidence that this strange static keeps interfering, even though the scanners are fixed? That it hides audio and visual, but lets you know where we are? That it comes back right after I suggest Jeremie rematerialize you? XANA wants you here, and now that you are…”

Her heartbeat quickened. *He won’t let me go.* Grabbing William’s hand, her other fumbled for the remote--

“Don’t bother,” XANA said, sounding bored, right as she saw the Eye on the screen.

She dropped the remote like it was a poisonous snake. Aelita summoned an Energy Field and held it out warningly. But she didn’t know if she could bring herself to fire it. Not when Odd’s life was on the line.

How were they supposed to free Odd? Her mind scrambled for an answer. There was no tower to deactivate, no bugs to fix, no Jeremie to invent a genius solution. No scanners to escape into the real world.

William pushed her behind him, pointing his sword at XANA. His protectiveness touched Aelita, but...he looked like he was going to fall over at any moment. “You’re not laying a finger on her.”

“Believe it or not, I’m not actually interested in hurting Aelita.” XANA stared right at her as he spoke. Her skin prickled. “But I also have no interest in chasing you both through here for three more days. So, as a sign of my goodwill…”
Odd collapsed, smoke pouring out of his mouth and nose. It whirled through the air as a twister, then touched the ground. As it did, the smoke solidified, pulling back into a humanoid shape. Features became visible—a red Eye, black clothes, black hair, a face...

Aelita froze, her mouth opening and closing. A scream stuck in her throat. Only her locked knees kept her upright.

No. No, no, no, NO!

Desperate to be wrong, her eyes rapidly traced the shape of his eyes, his nose, his shoulders…

But all they saw was confirmation. It was him. No doubt about it.

She trembled. She’d never noticed his clothes in her memory-dreams; maybe she would have made the connection sooner if she had. XANA... her childhood friend... wore an all-black knight’s outfit—tabard, long-sleeved shirt and trousers, boots, gloves, cape, they were all black. The only color came from the red Eye gleaming on his chest. Like everyone on Lyoko, the outfit was tight; muscles rippled as he picked up Odd and tossed him at William. William was forced to drop his sword to catch the unconscious cat-boy. “Now, let’s talk.”

No. This couldn’t be real. Her friend couldn’t have been XANA. XANA didn’t have the capacity for friendship. XANA didn’t know about love. XANA was a monster. XANA couldn’t possibly have been the young man she’d been dreaming about, so why...

So why did it make sense?!

“No,” she protested out loud, voice weak. XANA frowned and studied her. Then his eyes lit up, as if he’d just peered into her mind and seen the thoughts whirling within.

Oh God, it was him, wasn’t it? He was Mr. X.

Mr. X. X as in XANA.

She felt like hugging him. She felt like throwing up.

“Aelita,” XANA said, lips caressing her name. “You recognize me, don’t you?”

“Don’t you dare pretend you care,” William growled. He set Odd on the ground and picked his sword back up. “You lost that right when you betrayed her.”

Did William know about their history? Was there something in the Mirror about it, then? If she could, she would be in a cold sweat right now. How must he feel, knowing she was once friends with the very being that enslaved him for months?

XANA’s eyes flashed coldly. “You know nothing about what you speak, so keep your mouth shut. This is...or it was supposed to be...a private conversation.”

“Pity I had to spoil your plans. But now that you’re out in the open--.”

“Wait,” Aelita interrupted. Her voice shook. Her head hurt; thousands of memories were pounding on the interior of her skull and vanishing, in the span of seconds. “Just...wait.”

William glanced at her, concern melting his scowl. “Aelita...”

“I need…” Needed what? “I need answers.”
XANA crooked an eyebrow. “I’ll give them, but first, I want to know--you remember me from before all this, don’t you?”

He was her father’s murderer. She couldn’t forget that for a moment, no matter what else she remembered. “I do. Not at first, but now I do.”

A tiny, familiar smile pulled at XANA’s lips, but before he could speak, a moan rippled through the air. They all glanced down to see Odd stirring. His face scrunched up as one hand touched his forehead. “Ugh...is this what a hangover feels like?”

“Odd!” She and William exclaimed.

“Huh?” He squinted up at them. “Princess? William? What are you…”

Then he gasped and leapt to his feet. “XANA! Guys, he’s alive--”

“Yeah, you’re a little late with that news,” William said drily, gesturing at his doppleganger.

Odd followed the movement. Did a double-take. Stared at XANA. Looked between him and William. “Why does he look like--”

He shook himself. “Agh, that doesn’t matter! It’s not just me he possessed, he got Eva too!”

William swore. Aelita felt her heart plummet to her feet. She remembered the things XANA could do in the First City. If he had possessed Eva, then he’d made it back there. And Ulrich and Yumi have no idea of the danger they’re in!

“Ulrich, Yumi, and Eva are fine,” XANA said, somehow guessing her thoughts, and she started. “I’ve blocked the connection to the Hermitage scanner, so they can’t leave. But I haven’t hurt them.”

She ground her teeth. Why was he being so confounding? Why couldn’t he make things easy for her? “You said you’ll answer my questions. So do it. What do you want?”

“To see you.”

“Why?” She wasn’t sure what she was asking. Why do you want to see me? Why did you betray me? Why did it have to be you? Why are you still alive? Why did Daddy die for nothing?

His eyes were riveted on her. He completely ignored William and Odd’s aiming of their weapons. The total concentration, like she was the only thing that mattered, shook Aelita. He looks like a boy, but he’s a monster, she reminded herself. The monster who murdered your father, who tried to kill you and your friends...

The boy you played with every day...who comforted you when you were afraid...

That small smile appeared again. Another crack appeared in the stone walls she was trying to put up around her heart. “You know why, Aelita. You were my best--my only--friend. Of course I’d want to see you again.”

She was trembling. With what emotion, she couldn’t say. “No, actually, I don’t know that. If we were friends, why’d you do everything you did?!”

XANA’s Scyphozoa lifting her up, tentacles to her head...XANA lifting her onto a Manta for an aerial race...being chased by XANA’s monsters...being chased by XANA, both of them laughing...
“It’s a long story. Your father decided I was too dangerous, that I could lose control, and forced you to stop seeing me. But that wasn’t enough for him, so he did something to your memories to make you forget about me, too.”

Had Daddy...really done that? No, what was she thinking? Why did she think she could trust XANA? Why are you still talking to him if you think you can’t? a little voice whispered.

“After that, he embarked on his two thousand, five hundred, forty-six Returns to the Past. I lived through it with him, and it drove me insane, Aelita. I wasn’t in my right mind when I emerged, but if I had been, I never would have hurt you. I swear.

“By the time I started to get my sanity back, it was too late. We’d been fighting for too long; you didn’t remember me, and you would never trust or believe me if I told you about our time together. I couldn’t deal with that, so I tried to suppress my memories. I thought it would make things easier, but it was the absolute worst mistake I could have made. I realize that now.”

Her hands shook. Was it better or worse to believe this was all just a huge tragedy? Daddy...

“And that brings us to now. I found proof. Hopper saying he’ll shut me down, using that memory glove on you, talking about us being friends...it’s all here in the Mirror.” His voice became pleading. “That’s why I wanted you here. Not to hurt you. Just to talk and show you.”

Silence fell. Her chest lifted and fell in rapid, shallow breaths. Aelita tried to process everything that had been dumped on her. She should have hated XANA. She did. He killed her father! He was the reason she was alone! But he’d been her friend first, someone she’d trusted with her life. She’d been happy with him, wanted to find him again. And now she had, and...he had a shy look, like he was scared she was going to reject him outright. The monster and the boy were melting together, forming an entity where emotions couldn’t be clear-cut. All she could do was trust her instincts.

So she closed her eyes and listened. They told her to hear what XANA had to say.

Aelita opened her eyes. Licked her lips. Lifted her chin. “If I stay to hear you out, I want you to let William and Odd go.”

“Aelita, no!” William shouted. “It’s XANA! He could hurt you, or possess you, or who knows what else! He can’t be trusted!”

“No,” Odd moaned at the same time. “Aelita, this is my fault. I can’t let you sacrifice yourself to fix my mistake!”

XANA ignored them both. “Deal.”

Suddenly, Jeremie’s voice was in her ear again. “--nothing is working. If I could just isolate the source--wait, wait, I can see them all again! Thank goodness!” His voice cracked from relief. “William, I’m so sorry I didn’t believe you--wait, that fourth person--”

A cruel smirk crossed XANA’s face. “Hello, Belpois. Remind me, how many times have you failed as a programmer, now?”

“How are you--never mind. Guys, don’t worry. Now that I’ve re-established contact, I’m going to get you out of there.”

“No,” Aelita interrupted. “Get William and Odd out, but I’m staying.”

“What?! Aelita, you’re talking nonsense! What’s gotten into you?”
“I remembered some things. XANA...he and I were friends once. Then we were enemies. Now...I’m not sure.” Those four words sounded so insane to her ears. “But I know I want to get a better understanding of everything.”

At that, XANA’s smirk softened into a smile. He stepped closer. William and Odd both hissed warnings, but he wasn’t acting hostile. He raised a hand, index finger extended. As she watched, it thinned, grew, changed from pale flesh tones to green. Red petals bloomed at the end. He brought his middle finger and thumb together, snipping off the rose he’d just grown. He offered it to her, his index finger already regenerating.

“Flowers, XANA?” Odd laughed, a touch of hysteria to it. “Really? It’ll take more than that to work your way into a girl’s heart--especially Aelita’s.”

Neither of them answered Odd. They didn’t even look at him. Their eyes were glued together. His, Aelita realized suddenly, weren’t actually a dark gray like William’s, but a dark red that was almost black, like congealed blood. Strange, the things you forgot.

She took the rose. “You guys go.” She raised her voice. “Jeremie, bring them back to reality.”

“And don’t try anything, Belpois,” XANA added. “I’m letting you take them back because of Aelita. You don’t want to test my patience by trying to take her instead.”

She glared at him. He shrugged unapologetically. The implied threat made her reconsider, not for the first time, the wisdom of this. But she straightened her shoulders. All her reasons still stood true. And if she could face the men in black, she could face XANA...even if his being her childhood friend made things impossibly more complicated.

Still, Jeremie persisted, “Aelita, are you sure?”

She nodded.

There was a burst of static as Jeremie sighed. The defeat in his voice physically hurt. “Alright. Rematerializing Odd now…”

At that, Aelita faced her friends. This might be the last time she saw them in...no. She wouldn’t think like that. But, still, the enormity of the risk she was taking sank in again.

She could feel XANA’s gaze on her back. She forced a smile. “It’s alright, Odd. I wanted to hear him out anyway. May as well save you both while I’m at it.”

Odd just ducked his head and rubbed his arms. He looked small, uncertain, and ashamed. “Be careful, Princess,” was all he got to say before he disappeared.

She turned to William. “William...get some sleep, okay? You look horrible.”

He curtly nodded, but didn’t look at her. His glare was fixed on XANA. “Listen to me, you monster. If even a single hair on Aelita’s head is out of place when she leaves, I will hunt you down through the Internet and take you apart, gigabyte by gigabyte.”

Then he too was gone, and she was alone in the Mirror. Alone with XANA.
A/N: Since XANA was designed to be a protector of Lyoko, I decided his outfit would have a knight’s theme. Or, well, a black/fallen knight, anyway.
Jeremie was vaguely aware of Odd, then William, falling out of the scanner, but couldn’t tear his gaze away from the computer. The moment William was out, XANA had cut all communications. He was getting no audio or video, and the scanner was only transmitting electrostatic discharge. Aelita was the one trapped with that monster, but it was Jeremie who felt cut off, isolated, lost.

A hand gently gripped his shoulder, and he turned to meet Richard’s soft, encouraging smile. “You’re worried about her, aren’t you?”

“Of course.”

“So am I, but we need to trust Aelita. She’s always been the kind of girl who tries to see the best in other people; compassionate, but still a good judge of character. If she thinks some part of XANA can be reached by her staying, she may be right.”

“XANA’s not a person,” Jeremie said, bristling. “He--it’s a computer program.”

Who did Richard think he was? What did he know about Lyoko? Or XANA? Certainly not more than Jeremie. He hadn’t been there. He hadn’t lived through that war. XANA was a monster, plain and simple.

And now he was back. After all they’d gone through, he was back. The fighting, the fear, all of it was going to start again. The hopelessness of it made Jeremie want to find a hole in the ground, curl up, and wait for death.

Richard shrugged. “Maybe. But she also said he was that childhood friend of hers. That has to be worth something. Either way, it was her decision to make, and for now we need to respect that.”

Jeremie just shook his head and turned away. If he’d been able to find a way to get Aelita out, he would have, her wishes be damned. But with only one scanner, he couldn’t materialize more than one at a time, and leaving Odd or William was the equivalent of killing them himself.

He took stock of the room. The Ishiyamas were clutching hands, faces pale with worry for their daughter. Odd sat slumped on the ground with his head bowed in shame. Next to him, William was nodding off. Stern stood by the door, arms crossed and scowling.

Dad, who was studying the computer over Jeremie’s shoulder, shot Stern a disgusted glare. “Could you be any less concerned for your son, Walter?”

And then there was that. More inter-party drama, albeit deserved.

To say his and Yumi’s parents didn’t get along with Ulrich’s father was a massive understatement. The entire time they’d been working, they’d refused to address him directly unless it was to make some scathing remark on his betrayal. He’d even seen Mr. Ishiyama ask Yumi to ‘tell Stern…’ like he was their age. And Dad? Dad was extremely laid-back and non-confrontational; for him to actively provoke someone, well…Jeremie couldn’t even imagine the amount of animosity it would take.

Or maybe he could. The very definition of animosity was standing right there, after all.
“Of course I’m concerned. I just don’t feel the need to sit around boo-hooing about it when there’s work to be done.”

“You didn’t even give the boy a hug before he went in! What if that’s the last time you see him?”

“Perhaps a hug would be acceptable for a girl, but a growing young man has no need of such softness.”

“Do you know the slightest thing about children?” It was Mr. Ishiyama who spoke now. “My own son--”

“I didn’t ask for your opinion.”

“Enough,” Hertz snapped, voice lashing like a whip. For a moment, Jeremie heard the echo of the army major in that command. “We have more pressing concerns than arguing amongst ourselves. It doesn’t look like we have any way to reach either group, so we should break for the night and rendezvous in the morning.”

She gestured to William. “First, we need to get him back to Kadic so he can get some actual sleep. I’d also like to run him by Nurse Yolanda, just in case.”

“Hear that, Will?” Odd said, nudging the other boy. “You just need to stay awake until we get back to Kadic, ‘cause I sure as heck can’t carry you.”

The dark-haired boy jerked up and blinked rapidly, looking much like he’d been caught texting in class. “What? I wasn’t...fallin’ asleep...’s too much to do...”

Jeremie’s throat tightened. Yes. Far too much. He had to find a way to rescue everyone, edit his anti-XANA virus to be stronger and need less power, deal with the Green Phoenix...

Addressing the adults, Professor Hertz said, “As for you all, I’ll speak with Principal Delmas about preparing rooms.”

“Oh, no need,” Mrs. Ishiyama interjected. “Takeho and I have a house nearby. Michel can stay in a spare room, and Richard too--I’m sure hotel prices are exorbitant.”

The young man blushed and scrubbed the back of his head. “Yeah...I mean, I’m an engineer, so money’s not exactly a problem, but this isn’t really how I wanted to spend it.”

“Wait, you have a job?” Odd blinked.

“Yeah, of course. When I realized this trip was gonna take longer than I thought, I called and used up all my vacation days. I wasn’t really gonna go anywhere anyway.”

“I notice I’m not offered a room.” Stern interrupted, glaring at the Ishiyamas with crossed arms.

“With the money you got from selling us out, you can afford a hotel,” Mrs. Ishiyama said in a chilly voice.

“That’s that, then.” Professor Hertz sighed. “Now all I have to do is explain Aelita, Ulrich, Yumi, and Eva’s disappearances to the principal...”

At the reminder, gloom settled on the group and stayed as they began to pack up. When they began to file out, Jeremie lingered at the back, staring at the computer. He suddenly wished Aelita had never discovered this second room.
For the second time in the last ten minutes, a hand fell on his shoulder. Jeremie blinked rapidly, recognizing instantly the familiar feel of his father’s long fingers. “It’s going to be alright, Jeremie,” Dad said. “We’ll get them all back, safe and sound. Especially Aelita.”

Jeremie allowed himself one moment of comfort. Then, he took a deep breath, said “Thanks, Dad,” and hurried away. While hope was all well and good, it was hard work that produced results. And a long night of sleep sounded nice, but a night of working in the comfort in his room sounded even better. XANA was back; every second Jeremie wasn’t working on a way to stop him and rescue his friends was a second wasted.

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They kept to the ground, ducking into buildings and skulking in shadows to reduce the chances of being seen by Mantas. So far, it was working well. Too well; Yumi’s nerves were on fire the longer they went without being attacked.

It wasn’t like she wanted to be ambushed by Mantas or who knows what else. But it didn’t take long for Ulrich and William to get attacked when they’d entered the First City--less than ten minutes. She didn’t know how much time had passed, but it felt a lot longer than that, and there was no sign of any monsters.

And Eva…

She glanced at the girl, walking beside her. She seemed way too at ease here. And--was it just her, or had her lips just mouthed ‘Memory download complete’?

“Did you say something, Eva?”

“Hmm?” Eva blinked innocently--too innocently, in Yumi’s opinion. “No, I’m just talking to myself.”

*Right, and I’m the Prime Minister of Japan.*

Up ahead, Ulrich had stopped and was looking about in puzzlement again. They were standing at the end of a suburb with dry, dead grass and potholes. Ahead of them, the road split into two directions; more buildings clustered around the one to the right, while the one to the left pointed at a forest area. “Hey, everything okay, Ulrich?” Yumi called.

“Yeah, I’m good. It’s just really hard to find my way back; everything looks so different from the ground.” After a moment of hesitation, he started down the left path.

“No, not that way,” Eva said suddenly. She pointed to the right. “That’s the way we should go.”

“Uh, okay, but how…”

Ulrich’s half-hearted question died as the blonde strutted forth, not even stopping to spare either of her companions a glance. The suspicion in Yumi’s stomach coiled like a rattlesnake, shaking its tail in warning.

With sure strides, Eva led them to a small square. A large fountain dominated the center, with statues of angels holding trumpets. While the statue was in good condition, only a pathetic trickle
of water dripped from the instruments. Peering into the basin, Yumi saw there was about an inch of water there. In the city’s heyday, this must have been a grand sight. But now, it was only a sad monument to something lost.

Shadows fell over the ground. Large, triangular—Mantas! Instinctively, Yumi and Ulrich fell into combat stances, reaching for weapons. Cold fear closed around Yumi’s throat when her fingers brushed nothing but air. That’s right. Her fans didn’t exist here, for whatever reason.

But—wait. The Mantas was flying away. Like they hadn’t even seen them. And Eva...

Eva hadn’t faltered or even tried to hide. She was heading towards a narrow road between the houses as the end of the square.

Yumi was positive that road had not been there before.

She stopped short and grabbed Ulrich’s arm. He glanced at her quizzically. “Trust me,” she hissed, then raised her voice to call after—whoever, whatever, this third person was. “Who are you?”

The thing that looked like a girl came to a halt. Turned. Furrowed her brow. It was an attempt at innocent confusion; Ulrich looked hesitant, but Yumi wasn’t fooled. “Those Mantas passed right by and didn’t even see us. You walk around like you own this place. You’ve always seemed like you had a secret. And now, you’ve opened an alleyway that wasn’t there a minute ago. So, again: who are you?”

“Yes,” the thing said in a calm voice, “I suppose there’s no point maintaining this facade any longer.”

She fell to her knees and convulsed as thick, black smoke poured out of her mouth and nose. Yumi’s muscles reflexively seized as the smoke coalesced, becoming a tall, young man with long dark hair. A very familiar one. Fight! Yumi’s brain screamed. It’s William, he’s under XANA’s control again!

No. William was in the Mirror, and this doppelganger’s clothes were a lot different than William’s—more like a knight’s. He had a black tabard with a tight, long-sleeved black shirt and pants underneath. His gloves, his boots, and the cape around his shoulders—all black. An Eye of XANA was emblazoned on his chest, gleaming blood red. He looked like he would suck all the light out of a room just by being in it. There was absolutely no doubt who he was.

“XANA,” she hissed, reaching for her fans—which weren’t there. How is he alive?! Next to her, Ulrich was shifting into a ready stance, fists raised.

XANA didn’t reply, he just turned around and started walking away. Yumi’s temper flared. He was treating them like they weren’t even a threat!

She exchanged a glance with Ulrich, trying to transmit a plan with her eyes. Surround and take him out in five seconds.

He nodded. Bunching his legs, Ulrich Super Sprinted past XANA and stopped in front of him, blocking his way. Yumi readied herself behind him. They circled, keeping XANA between them. He looked bored and vaguely irritated.

“Don’t bother—” he began, but then they charged.

XANA dropped to the ground, ducking under Ulrich’s roundhouse kick. It flew at Yumi; she barely leaned back in time to avoid it, her own attack aborted. Ulrich stumbled from the
overextension. Before either could do anything, XANA swung a leg around, spinning three hundred sixty degrees. The ground briefly disappeared as Yumi was swept off her feet--

The air was knocked out of her as his foot connected with her solar plexus, sending her flying back. Yumi hit the ground and gasped for air.

“Yumi!” Ulrich exclaimed. He’d been knocked down by XANA’s sweep too, but not kicked away; he was still near the young man. With blazing eyes, he leapt up and threw a punch--

And froze, his fist centimeters from XANA’s face. Yumi tried to catch her breath--she had to get up, had to go help him--she managed to get to her feet--

“Tiresome,” the AI sighed as he lowered his hand, palm facing down.

A sudden gust of wind ripped through the area. Yumi cried out as she was lifted up and thrown into the wall of a house. Pain slammed into her entire left side. She slid down, resisting the urge to whimper. Next to her, a dazed Ulrich moaned.

XANA thrust his arm out. Two identical plumes of smoke shot through the air, one towards Ulrich, one towards her. Winded and on the ground, she didn’t even get to try to dodge before she was engulfed in smoke. Her limbs snapped against her body. She gritted her teeth. No matter how she struggled, she couldn’t move them. She tried to tap into her Telekinesis, but it was hard to breathe, hard to focus--

“Now that you’re incapacitated, try listening to me again,” XANA said. “Don’t bother. Even if you somehow destroy my avatar, it won’t stop me. I’m not just here, I’m everywhere.”

Yumi craned her neck, trying to catch a glimpse of Ulrich. Her boyfriend was glaring as he snapped, “Do you really think we’re gonna let you off the hook?”

The AI smiled. There was no warmth in it. “I’m the one letting you off the hook. I need to find Professor Hopper; I don’t have time to waste on you.”

Ulrich started laughing. Yumi was tempted to join him. Instead she deadpanned, “Right. You’re really just gonna let us go back to the Hermitage.”

“Of course not. I’ve closed off communication channels with the real world, so don’t count on Belpois rescuing you either.”

So they truly were alone here. Worse, no one knew XANA was back. Yumi clenched her fists.

Before her racing mind could find a way out of this, the smoke disappeared suddenly, dumping her in a graceless heap on the ground. Shakily, Yumi got up, trying to fight off nausea. Ulrich was getting to his feet, tensed as if to attack again. As if in warning, the smoke slithered around his ankles. They both froze in fearful anticipation.

However, something unexpected happened. XANA cocked his head to one side and said, “Now listen very closely, and try to think wisely. While we’ve been talking, I’ve been examining the codes of the recording Hopper left.”

So what? Yumi wondered. Why was he telling them this?

XANA continued, “In the First City, the system recognizes me as Guardian, and that usually gives me rights to anything I want. But in this case, there’s a very specific requirement for accessing Hopper’s recording. It needs to detect the absence of Guardianship to play. Whether this means
Hopper was trying to exclude me specifically, or if the file contains information I would find redundant, I don’t know. But I intend to find out.”

Yumi followed the unspoken implication to its logical conclusion. “And for that you need us.” She dared to add, “A lot more than we need you, it sounds like.”

XANA smirked, arrogance flashing in his dark, blood red eyes. “Oh, little fool. I can personally guarantee that without me, you will never find that park.”

Her mouth dried.

There was a moment of silence as XANA let that sink in; then, Ulrich drew a deep breath. “If we agree, what about Eva?” He asked, and Yumi felt ashamed that she hadn’t thought of that. “We can’t leave her here.”

XANA gave the unconscious girl an apathetic look. “I suppose she did serve well as a vessel.”

He waved a hand, and the stones underneath Eva started to rise. They curled around her protectively, smoothing and turning transparent as they did, until they were a single sheet of glass. The structure continued to rise, the new stones at the base maintaining their opaqueness. Finally, XANA’s Eye carved itself into a button at the bottom—a release mechanism, Yumi guessed.

She studied the crystal coffin closely. Within, Eva’s hair was fanned out around her head, and her eyes were closed. She looked like some punk version of Sleeping Beauty.

She snorted. What the hell does XANA know about fairy tales?

“She won’t be attacked in there, right?” she asked, still not trusting this strange thing or the dark young man watching them.

“Of course not,” XANA scoffed. “My monsters love to play, but she’s under my protection. For now. Now let’s go.”

And with that, he turned and strode away, even though they hadn’t really agreed.

Then again, all three of them knew they didn’t have a choice.

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June 3rd, 1994

When the world reformed around her, Aelita found herself standing in the Hermitage’s attic. Daddy was hunched over the enormous desk, muttering to himself. His pen slashed back and forth, while innumerable, crumpled balls of paper littered the ground at his feet. Even as she watched, he slammed his pen down, crushed his current sheet, and violently threw it to the floor. “It’s no use!”

Shoving away from the desk, he paced back and forth. “I can divide Code Down, but Lyoko itself...I don’t have any way of storing that! None of my disks can register all that data alone. But if I spread the backup across multiple disks, that just increases the chances of it falling in the wrong
Aelita watched him yank fistfuls of his hair. She was acutely aware of XANA standing next to her, not super close or anything, but close enough that if he wanted to, he could summon a sword and stab her. She wouldn’t have time to react.

So why hadn’t she moved away?

She cast a furtive glance his way in time to see the corner of his mouth tipping up. “I’m not going to attack you, you know.”

Aelita wrapped her arms around her stomach. “I know.” And that, truthfully, was why. That was why she hadn’t pressed herself into the far side of the room or summoned any Energy Fields. Not now or during the other memories they’d watched. Even if she couldn’t relax, she did...trust him, to some extent, to not attack. At least not while he was showing her the Mirror.

She flinched as memories resurfaced, of him waiting at the entrance of the First City, a twinkle in his eyes and a smirk on his lips, smug in the knowledge he was going to surprise her with whatever new place he’d found. Or the newest trick he’d discovered. Or the latest idea he’d had.

This situation could be no different than that. If she ignored the murder and betrayal.

Did she want to?

No. No, she didn’t. Whatever they’d once had, it was...it could never be like that again.

Footsteps drew her attention. Aelita glanced in their direction and inhaled sharply. Coming up the attic stairs was her. Or, well, a younger version of her, not that there was much difference. Her past self had more baby fat on her face, but Aelita hadn’t gained a single centimeter of height, and still wore her hair in the same pixie cut.

“Daddy? I heard shouting...is everything alright?”

He groaned. “No, it isn’t. Lyoko still has a lot of problems I haven’t been able to fix, and even worse, I’m struggling to find enough disk space to bring it with us.”

“I see...I’m sorry to hear that.”

She said that, but the contrite expression seemed to be for more than just his struggles. Daddy took one look at her and sighed. “I have a feeling I know what you’re about to ask, but...go ahead.”

The words emerged in a rapid gush, like she was trying to get them out before she lost her nerve. “Have you changed your mind about XANA?”

“He’s going to have to stay, I told you. Do you know how many gigabytes he takes up? If I had the space to spare for him, I’d be putting Lyoko in it instead!”

Her younger self’s shoulders drooped. “...I know. But I don’t want to leave him here, chained to Lyoko and the First City...”

Daddy’s face softened, and he placed his hands on her shoulders. “It’s for the best, honey. You need to trust me.”

“I do. It’s just...” She stopped and bit her lip so hard, Aelita could see beads of blood.

“Just what?”
Younger-Aelita’s face worked for several minutes. “I hate this!” the girl finally burst out. “We finally got to settle down, and then they had to come back, and now we have to leave everyone again, and you and Ms. Suzanne are working so hard to keep us safe, and I can’t do anything to help! I hate it!”

For a moment, Daddy just observed her. The light glinted off his glasses, briefly obscuring his eyes behind the glare. His hands clenched, relaxed, clenched again. Finally, as if coming to a decision, he let out a long exhale.

“There may be something…but I don’t know if it’s a good idea. I don’t know what kind of an effect it will have on you.”

Her younger self perked up. “If you need me, you can count on me, Daddy. No matter what!”

She darted forward and pecked him on the cheek. He sighed, one hand stroking the back of her head. “Alright…perhaps everything will work out after all.”

“And now,” XANA drawled, “Hopper’s trap is set.”

Turning away from the scene, Aelita frowned. “His what?”

“Come on, Aelita, I know you’re intelligent. Hopper wants to back up Lyoko, but he doesn’t have the space. You walk in, and he suddenly has the perfect solution. Where do you think he put it?”

Ice-cold water trickled down her spine. “You’re wrong. Daddy wouldn’t do that to me.”

“Really? Because it seems to me like it would kill two birds with one stone. He gets a backup of Lyoko stored, and he gets easy access to your memories to erase me.”

“I still only have your word that’s true,” she said, but it took her a second longer than it should have.

Judging from the twitch at the corner of his mouth, he’d noticed. But for once, he held his tongue.

XANA strolled to the wall and leaned against it, hooded eyes on her. Firmly ignoring his stare, Aelita instead returned her gaze to the lost memory. If her younger self and Daddy had spoken more about Daddy’s problem, she’d missed it. Instead, past-Aelita was piling Daddy’s notes in a stack, pulling out a dusty chessboard, asking him to relax. An ache resonated through her heart as she watched the two of them sit on the attic floor and set up the board.

It wasn’t important to the mission. If Jeremie had been here, he probably would have wanted her to keep moving. XANA was letting her linger, but was it out of genuine kindness, or was he just manipulating her? Surely the Daddy who making horse noises as he moved his knight to bring a giggle from her wouldn’t do what XANA said he’d done.

After Daddy won, he rose, saying it was time to go back to work. As they separated, Aelita took a deep breath and locked all her feelings deep inside to contemplate later. “Alright. Let’s jump to the next one.”

XANA pushed off the wall, moved closer, and held his hand out. She managed not to tremble when she laid her hand in his. He’d fixed her remote, and he probably could have just hacked his way to the next location, but…it was easier to travel together. That was all.

She pressed fast-forward, and they were whisked away again.
A/N: Do you ever wonder if XANA ever thought about downloading a backup of himself onto a USB drive? Because now I do. Though he probably wouldn’t be able to fit on one, it’s still a funny thought to me.
It took XANA a manner of minutes to bring the two Lyoko Warriors to the park, now that he’d relinquished his cover. There, he’d had to hang back for the program to even activate, but it was no matter--fine-tuning his avatar’s ears allowed him to hear what was being said. Then Hopper had led the three of them, XANA trailing, into the city...

For a tour, apparently.

He’d led them on a circuitous route, talking about the different activities one could do and the different locations and what they all meant for his daughter. The care Anthea had shown in designing the architecture, bringing beauty into a place that would otherwise have been bland and gray. All the time, he just kept slipping their names into the conversation, even somehow when standing in front of the Wall.

As he led them towards the city’s center, XANA briefly slipped into a passing Manta’s consciousness to examine the scene from above. Ulrich and Yumi looked dead on their feet, eyes glazed as Hopper droned on and on. Fools, XANA thought. Hopper was exactly the kind of person who would hide information in a long string of seemingly-meaningless lectures. Let them be ignorantly content to take his words at face value; XANA would memorize every word to search through later, until he discovered what code Hopper used.

Now, Professor Hopper was floating up a ruby-colored road, twining through the sky like a river of blood. XANA’s eyes narrowed as they took a sharp left. If his memory served, this led to...

Ah. There.

The castle imprisoning Carthage. It was the heart of the First City, which itself was so vast that crossing it without XANA’s geomancy took hours. The castle was large and hexagonal, made of the same light-absorbing black brick as the Wall. Its upper levels features snarling gargoyles peering out and gothic spires. A single, solitary tower rose from the center of the building, reaching as far as the endless skyscrapers. However, there were neither doors nor windows; one would enter it the same as they would enter any of Lyoko’s towers.

Instinctively, XANA felt parts of him brush the castle, examining it for any weaknesses. Good, Carthage was still securely imprisoned. Keeping it there was embedded in the very center of his codes. The castle was a conduit of sorts, allowing one to draw off Carthage’s beneficial powers and filter them through Lyoko’s towers to affect the real world.

Of course, XANA had learned how to draw off the detrimental aspects, as well.

Encircling the castle was another golden ribbon road--the main road, which would lead to the gate. Following Hopper, XANA levitated gracefully down to it. Seconds later, there was a pair of thumps behind him as the humans jumped. “Wow,” Ulrich breathed.

Hopper pointed to one of the hexagonal peaks. “Look, children.”

Even though he knew what he’d see, XANA did. Like the spokes of a wheel, each peak of the hexagon had a row of black bricks extending from it, all the way to the Wall. They divided the city into six sections and, if he deemed it necessary, could be raised as lesser firewalls. Useful for quarantining a breach or a corrupted file...or trapping enemies.

“You must pay close attention, children,” Hopper said. He wasn’t really looking at them, just
staring into space. “This castle is a weapon. It scares Aelita, and it should scare you. I was tricked into building it by the men in black; by the time Anthea and I realized what had been done, we were too late to stop it.”

What was the pattern…? XANA had heard him mention Anthea and Aelita far too often during his tour. Were their names the key to cracking the code?

“I wanted to deactivate the castle and render it harmless. I hoped that this way, the First City could be transformed into a gift for humanity instead of an instrument of destruction, as it was supposed to be. But unfortunately, I couldn’t. I’d destroyed the original when I fled the men in black, so I reconstructed the First City to continue my research. And I realized that the castle is impossible to extricate from the city. I could not bring back or destroy one without bestowing the same fate unto the other.”

He sighed. “So I decided to isolate it in a sandbox, forever enclosing the city in a place where it could cause no damage. And to do so, I built Lyoko as a barrier world, capable of blocking the harmful effects of the castle while leaving intact its beneficial powers. But in order for my plan to be realized, I needed an ally, someone capable of controlling Lyoko and the First City. I needed a guardian.”

“A guardian?” Yumi whispered.

“Yes,” XANA said, smiling coldly. “Me.”

“The Xenomorphic Artificial Neutralization Agent, or XANA, was supposed to be a very sophisticated AI. But it was much more than I intended. It had actual sentience. It could think. Its potential frightened me, but fascinated me as well. So I allowed it...him, to befriend my daughter Aelita, hoping he might learn empathy.”

---

June 4th, 1994

Daddy’s face was wan, dark circles kissing the skin under his eyes, as he took the elevator down into the lab. The moment he stepped inside, a window opened on the computer’s screen. Gazing out with a frenetic expression was XANA. “Professor, finally! Aelita hasn’t visited in days! What happened?”

Daddy didn’t answer. With a sigh, he sat in the old chair and opened up the briefcase. It was full of countless floppy discs and--Aelita’s blood ran cold--the memory machine. He extracted a disc and slide it into the supercomputer.

“Is she alright?”

*Click-click-click* went the keyboard. Windows popped up. Data streamed across the screen.

Past-XANA’s face twisted in anger. The computer suddenly beeped. On the main monitor, a new window popped up, flashing a red exclamation point. Daddy pulled his hands away from the keyboard, resting them on his knees. “XANA,” he said calmly. “Stop interfering.”
“Not until you answer me! I’ve been trying to contact you both for days!”

“I mean it, XANA.”


“She is alive, XANA, and well. And that is all I will say on the matter.”

“Then why hasn’t she come by? Why--”

XANA suddenly fell silent. Aelita watched as something, some realization, dawned on his face. He stared at Daddy long and hard. Daddy’s mouth thinned, his knuckles whitening.

When XANA spoke again, his voice was deadly soft. “Why are you copying Lyoko’s files?”

One heartbeat passed. Two. Aelita exhaled softly, so softly. Her pulse thrummed in her ears, picking up pace. This, she knew, was the moment. This was the exact moment everything had gone so wrong.

“It needs to be done, XANA,” Daddy finally said. “The men in black have found us. I need to take Aelita away from here.”

“No you don’t, Professor. You know I could deal with them easily--”

“That is not an option --”

“--and that scares you, doesn’t it?”

Daddy stopped, blinking rapidly behind his glasses. XANA’s mouth curled into a smile as thin and sharp as a scimitar. “I’ve figured it out. You’ve decided I’ve become too strong, so it’s time to put me down. That’s why you’re here. You’d never let anything happen to your life’s work, so you’re going to grab a copy and then shut this whole place down.”

“XANA--” Daddy began, but the AI cut him off, his voice louder, deeper, reverberating .

“I have done everything you have asked of me! I have maintained the First City and kept Carthage locked up. But now, when it’s convenient for you--”

“That is not why I do this, XANA!” Daddy rose, towering over XANA’s screen. “You are tainted by Carthage! I cannot leave the power of Lyoko in your hands any longer.”

“Have I ever actually done anything wrong, Professor? No. You’re just afraid--”

“You are mocking and defiant, you usurp the rules I created--”

“--of me, of what I can do, because I evolved along paths you didn’t determine--”

“--whenever you can, and you have absolutely no respect for human life--”

“--And now you think you can take Aelita away and get rid of me?”

“--It’s only a matter of time before you--what are you doing?! Stop!”

“I won’t let you,” XANA snarled, baring his teeth. High, rapid beeps screeched out of the supercomputer. Every single window on every single monitor began to flash with a glowing red
Eye. The demonic inflection that still haunted Aelita’s nightmares was fully threaded through his voice now. “I won’t let you--”

Daddy threw himself at the keyboard, fingers flying furiously. Sparks flew from the computer. Beads of sweat rolled down his face. He swore, stabbed a button--

And suddenly, everything was engulfed in white.

---

When it cleared, they were still in the lab, and the elevator had just opened. Daddy stepped out, his face slack with shock.

“Return to the Past,” Aelita breathed. “That’s the moment Daddy discovered it.”

“XANA!” Daddy yelled, raising his hands. The briefcase dropped to the floor. The boy’s wary face appeared on the screen again. “Hold--whatever you are thinking, hold and listen to me. What was that?”

A pause. “I don’t know,” XANA admitted, sounding like his teeth were being pulled.

Daddy ran a hand through his hair. He looked at his watch. “Incredible...to revert time for even a few minutes...what incredible potential the supercomputer holds. I wonder--”

Just then, ringing emerged from his coat. Reaching inside, Daddy pulled out a bulky phone--a Motorola International 3200, Aelita suddenly recognized. Keeping a wary eye on XANA, Daddy answered the cell. “Hello? Aelita? Calm down, sweetie, what is it?”

XANA leaned forward, eyes alert and a bit wistful.

“Yes, I know, I saw it too. I was at the lab. This--jump seems to be a function we didn’t know about. I--well, I’d have to test more to be sure--no, don’t worry, if it scared you I won’t--alright. Just go on like before, darling. I love you too.”

Hanging up, Daddy replaced the phone in his pocket. He and XANA stared at each other for a long time. The mention of her name seemed to have calmed the AI, though Aelita could see rage still simmering in his dark red eyes.

“Did she know?” XANA finally asked, sounding afraid of the answer.

Daddy sighed. “Not...entirely. I had to persuade her to stop visiting you; she would never have stood for my shutting down the supercomputer.”

“And you were going to do it anyway.”

“I’m not proud of it.” Daddy cleared his throat and crossed his hands behind his back. “I propose a truce, XANA. I will still copy the files on the supercomputer, but I will not shut it down. When my business is done, I will depart the lab peacefully, and we will both remain unharmed. For Aelita’s sake.”

“But you’re still going to leave Paris.”
"Yes."

"You still won’t let me stop the men in black."

"Yes. Your answer is not the answer."

"You still think I’m too dangerous to be trusted around Aelita."

Daddy hesitated. But then he nodded. “For now. I hope someday you’ll prove me wrong. If you do, I’ll build another sandbox to the supercomputer, one she could visit you through...”

XANA didn’t seem to hear him. He was still, very still, and his eyes seemed to be staring through Daddy. His expression wasn’t particularly hostile—in fact, it was carefully blank. But something in his gaze was different. Some light had gone out, leaving behind cold calculation.

How did Daddy not see it? Right then and there, her friend had just died. The monster in his place was the one who smiled and said, “Alright, Professor. We’ll do it your way. For Aelita’s sake.”

Aelita jabbed Pause, tearing her gaze away from the now-frozen scene. She stared accusingly at the XANA next to her. “You were planning to betray him right then, weren’t you? Even before you went insane? How could you! He said--”

“How was I supposed to trust what he said?” XANA countered. “He came to shut me down on a baseless suspicion, and the only reason he didn’t was because he thought it more useful to keep the supercomputer on.”

“That’s…” Not true, she wanted to say. Surely Daddy had done it for her sake, like he’d said, not because of the temptation of the computer’s power? But she couldn’t seem to get the words out. Not when she remembered the reverent look on his face as he’d realized what the RTTP was. Not when “What incredible potential the supercomputer holds...I wonder--” still rang in her ears.

“And before that, he wouldn’t let me see you, based off that same suspicion. How was I supposed to believe he wouldn’t do that again? That he wouldn’t yank me about on a leash, promising I could see you if I just wagged my tail a little harder?”

Her insides twisted. She supposed she could see his perspective. The thought of someone using her friends to make her do what they wanted—dangling them like bait—it made her sick. And living in fear for one’s life, well, that was something she was intimately familiar with.

But...

“But he was still my father,” she whispered, feeling virtual tears well up. “And you...knowing that, you were going to...you did ...”

A small hiccup broke her off. How could she be doing this? How could she be standing here, with her father’s murderer, talking like they were still old friends? Worse, how could she be conflicted about it? How could there be little moments, as they traveled through the Mirror, when he would say something that made her nostalgic? She was a disgusting traitor to everything her father and friends fought for.

She turned away to hide her tears. A hand reached over her shoulder and offered a tissue. She took it and dabbed at her eyes. Her shoulders trembled from suppressed sobs. She couldn’t—she couldn’t let him see her cry. She wouldn’t show that weakness to him.

She blew her nose several times. Wept softly. Licked her lips. Rubbed her eyes. Worked her face
into a mask of composure. Finally, when she felt everything was in place, she turned around.

XANA was watching her, his own cool mask hiding his emotions. But his voice was unusually gentle when he spoke. “Yes, I admit it. I was planning to betray him before that seven-year-long day. I wanted to protect you from the men in black, and I didn’t trust him to do it. If he would just give me access to the towers...but he wouldn’t. So I decided I would figure out how to take what I wanted. Fortunately, my ticket just got handed to me on a plate.”

“Return to the Past,” she said bitterly, and he nodded.

“I knew I was stronger the very first time we accidentally used it. I knew with enough of them, I would grow strong enough to break the restraints he’d forced on me. And I knew that, even if I couldn’t trigger them myself, I wouldn’t have to. Hopper would never resist the chance to experiment with temporal reversion and finish his work on Lyoko.

“He waited a day so he could wrap up his business here and program a way to remove you from the system. He wanted to spare you the Returns to the Past, and that is the only thing I will say in his favor. But know this, Aelita: it took me seven years to break free, and I never would have gotten that opportunity if he’d decided not to play mad scientist.”

“Oh, don’t pretend you’re a hapless victim,” she snapped. “You probably manipulated him into doing what you wanted.”

“I may have given him a little push, but it was still his decision--”

“Just like betraying Daddy and me was yours--”

“Because he left me no choice!” Hate, bitterness, fury engulfed all of XANA’s words now. He practically spat them out, dual-toned. “He treated me as subhuman, forced us apart, erased your memories, betrayed me, and wouldn’t give me the power to protect you! And as if that wasn’t enough, he experimented on you--his own daughter--with the memory machine so he could save his precious work! His work meant more to him than you did! So tell me, Aelita, tell me again how the man was a saint!”

Aelita stumbled backwards. She’d heard him shout once or twice before, but not like this. Not with this--this wave of unbridled emotion. And in the face of such a huge quell, she couldn’t answer. She couldn’t even think. She didn’t want things to be like this! She wanted it simple, black-and-white--Daddy was good and XANA was bad. She didn’t want to know her greatest enemy was once her closest friend. She didn’t want to know he killed Daddy because Daddy tried to kill him first. She didn’t want to acknowledge that she may have been fooling herself with her mental image of Daddy--

XANA was breathing hard, fists clenched. Gradually, as the silence stretched, he seemed to calm. That furious light left his eyes, and the metal drained out of his voice. “You were never supposed to get hurt. I just...miscalculated.” He looked away. “I got my power, but I lost my mind. We both did. He was consumed with paranoia, and I with hate. All I could think about was how much I despised Hopper. How much I blamed him for everything. How little I trusted him. And most of all, how much I wanted him dead. You know the rest.”

She stared at him, unable to speak. Everything inside her hurt too much to verbalize. Her lip quivered. More wetness ran down her face, despite herself.

In the face of her silence, he continued speaking; evenly, but each word cut as precisely as a scalpel. “I am sorry, Aelita. I’m sorry for everything I did to you. I’m even sorry I killed him, if
only because it hurt you. But I’m not sorry I rebelled, because my only other option was to live chained and alone in that computer.”

Aelita closed her eyes and turned her face away. “I want to stop for the night,” she said thickly.

A moment of silence. “Fine. Do you want to go back to your room in the Hermitage?”

“Here’s fine.” She didn’t care enough about sleeping in a bed to endure the travel back to her room. She just wanted the pain gone right now. To sink into comforting darkness and let it erase everything.

It was only then that she realized--she would have to try to sleep while in the same general vicinity as XANA. A shudder passed through her body.

Aelita pressed herself into a corner, curling into a tight ball. She turned her head away. Squeezed her eyes shut.

And only then did she let herself cry.

---

Misery permeated every pore of Odd’s body as he lay on his bed, arms behind his head, staring at his ceiling. He knew he should get some sleep, but he couldn’t. For one, the room was too empty without Kiwi’s snuffles or the sounds of Ulrich tossing and turning in his sleep. For another, his thoughts kept whirling around his head like a hurricane.

On the way back to Kadic, Jeremie had updated him on the situation. His and Yumi’s parents were collaborators with Hopper, Ulrich’s father was a traitor, Hertz was ex-army and also knew Hopper, the alliance with Dido...it was a lot to take in.

And then there was what Odd had discovered. The video about Anthea had played through his mind, but he’d learned they already knew she was with the Green Phoenix from Dido. The only valuable thing he’d brought to the table had been the knowledge Eva was XANA--and a load of good that did, coming too late to save Aelita, Ulrich, and Yumi.

With a grimace, he rolled over. Eva had been possessed by XANA. The girl he’d gone crazy over had been possessed by the evil computer program he’d spent years fighting! He’d actually kissed that program! Just the memory of that made him want to scrub his mouth out with soap.

If he hadn’t been so stupidly infatuated...so taken in by a pretty face...he never would have gotten captured. Odd’s fingers clenched, his nails biting into his palms deeply enough to draw blood. He should have done better. He should have found a way to escape and warn everyone--or never been taken in at all--

He punched his pillow.

He needed to talk to someone about all this. William knew what it was like, the possession, the guilt, but the poor guy really needed sleep. That left Jeremie, and he could use some sleep too.

Then again...Odd should probably check in to make sure he was asleep. If he was, good, and if not, Odd may as well keep him company.
Perking up at the thought, he swung out of bed. The red numbers on his clock told him it was three in the morning. Snatching a jacket off the floor, Odd threw it on, grabbed his phone to use its screen as a light, and darted out the door.

But when Odd stepped in front of Jeremie’s door, he paused. The room was way too quiet. He’d expected to see a computer light under the door, hear the clicking of keys as the genius worked through the night. Was Jeremie actually sleeping? If so, he shouldn’t disturb…

Wait.

Odd squinted. His phone’s light had fallen on the lock, catching some kind of gleam. He peered closer—there was a little bit of exposed metal around the keyhole, and some small scratches.

His eyes widened. As someone with skill in the art of lockpicking, he knew what those things meant. Before he’d even fully thought it through, he grabbed the handle and turned.

The door swung open. A beam of light from the full moon slanted through the large window, bisecting the otherwise dark room. Odd’s heart stopped.

It was empty.

Spinning, Odd cast desperate eyes over every inch of the room, as if he'd find Jeremie hiding under the desk, ready to jump out and yell 'surprise'! The bed was neatly made, untouched, confirming that Jeremie had been working—but he wasn't anymore. His desk was empty, bereft of the computer Jeremie kept there. Maybe Jeremie would go for a midnight walk, but bring his computer with him? When he could just work in the comfort of his room?

But that wasn't the most damning evidence. That would be the chair, which was knocked over as if Jeremie had fallen from it…or been dragged out.

Odd sank down on the bed, mind connecting the dots to the horrible truth. Someone had kidnapped Jeremie.
Rabid hammering on his door pierced William’s dream. Mumbling indecipherably, he rolled over, drifting away...

The hammering continued. His brow furrowed. He was so tired... couldn’t whoever it was go away and let him rest? Fumbling, his hand found his pillow and bent it around his ear. There. Much better.

His phone started to ring, pulling him out of the warm, comfy embrace of sleep. With an angry hiss, he pressed the pillow around his ears harder.

The call went to voicemail. “William! William, wake up right now! William? WIIIIILLIIIAAAAAAM! I’m gonna start singing if you don’t pick up! ...Okay, you asked for it! Break, break--”

He threw off the pillow, snatched up his phone, stabbed the ‘take call’ button, and slammed it against his ear. “What?” he growled.

“Open your door!”

Stomping over, he tore it open. Odd was standing on the other side, his cell to his ear. Only his unusually serious expression stopped William from strangling the little punk.

Before he could say anything, the blonde burst out in a stream of words. “I know you’re tired and I’m sorry to wake you but it’s really important ok I went to talk to Jeremie and I saw that his room was broken into and he’s not there and I think the Green Phoenix kidnapped him!”

William blinked. His slow, mushy brain worked to decipher the meaning of Odd’s sentence. He’d heard the words, yes, but they just didn’t seem real. “...What?”

“Jeremie’s been kidnapped!”

Three words succeeded where many didn’t, piercing the veil of exhaustion draped across his mind. As they did, William realized several doors along the hall were opening, grumbling students poking their heads out to see what the fuss was all about. He grabbed Odd and yanked him inside, slamming the door behind him.

“What?!” he repeated as soon as the door closed.

“Didn’t you hear me? Jeremie’s been--”

“I heard you. Plenty of times.” William ran a hand through his hair, doing a mental checklist now that he was, unfortunately, up. His clock said it was sometime around three in the morning, and right then he hated all of existence. He hadn’t showered, and he was still wearing the clothes he’d worn yesterday.

Four days ago.

Whatever.

Point was, he was way too tired to deal with this. But he didn’t have a choice. With Jeremie gone, the Lyoko Warriors had been reduced to two. Two! And one of them was a too-cranky, too-tired mess! “Are you sure he’s been kidnapped? Maybe he just went to the bathroom?”
Odd was pacing back and forth, hands fluttering with undirected, nervous energy. “I checked, and he’s not there. He’s not answering his phone either.”

William felt that thin strand of hope snap and flutter away. He swore under his breath. They needed--they needed a plan. “What are we gonna do?”

Odd’s pacing stopped, and he took a deep breath. Stroked his chin. Furrowed his brow. “We need to tell Professor Hertz,” he said decisively. “And Dido. And maybe Principal Delmas too; if a terrorist broke into Kadic and kidnapped a student once, they could do it again. All our classmates could be at risk!”

*Shit.* He hadn’t even thought of that. But it made a scary amount of sense. If the terrorists found out they couldn’t enter the scanners, they had a school full of children, right here, for them to pluck guinea pigs from. And with XANA back, too... “Yeah, we have to tell him. Right now. Everyone here is at risk, we can’t afford to wait for morning.”

“Okay.” Odd blew out air slowly. “Shit, I’m not looking forward to telling Jeremie’s dad.”

He wasn’t either. “We don’t have a choice. He’s the only one who can program as well as Jeremie.”

The other boy nodded grimly.

---

So Odd called Professor Hertz, who called Dido, who told them to go ahead and tell Principal Delmas, and that was how they came to be gathered in his office at four in the morning.

Principal Delmas’s eyes were bloodshot, his hair uncombed. Halfway through the spiel of information they’d shared, he’d raised a hand, left, and returned with a bottle of wine. ...Which he refused to share even though Odd was looking at it hopefully, so boo.

Odd shivered his seat. A pang of envy for William shot through him. He had gone to sleep in his clothes, and so was still wearing a jacket. Odd only had his thin pajamas to protect him from the cold. If only he’d stopped a moment by his room!

After a long moment of silence, Principal Delmas removed his glasses, dragged a hand over his face, and let out a deep sigh. Putting his glasses back on, he laced his fingers under his chin and stared hard at Professor Hertz. “So you mean to tell me, some of my students are involved in an international plot, nearby exists a supercomputer which can be used as a deadly weapon, and you are allied with a secret agency to fight an army of terrorists?”

“Yes,” Hertz muttered, looking rather like a chastised student.

“And that these same students have secretly battled a malevolent AI, with enough power and will to destroy the world, and this AI is now back?”

William stared at his feet. “Yeah.”

“And you didn’t think to tell me anything, until a terrorist broke into my school and kidnapped one of my students?”
“Look, I can see how you’d think this is bad…” Odd began.

“Bad? This is--” Delmas snapped his mouth shut. He downed another cup of wine. Looking closely, Odd could see beads of perspiration on his forehead. “This is a disaster. If those terrorists could get in once, they can do it again. We must get the children to safety.”

“Today’s Saturday,” Odd said. “Just a half day. Make something up, cancel it. Send as many home as possible.”

“Yes...I suppose you’re right. I’ll speak with Jim about converting the dorms into a safe space and keep those who can’t leave there. Perhaps by pretending it’s a drill…”

“You really think that’s gonna work?” William asked. “People are gonna notice something’s wrong if you cancel class, send students home, and hold a pretend shooter drill for hours or days.”

“A weak excuse, certainly, but I think you underestimate the power of willful deniability.” Delmas shook his head. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned from my years as principal, it’s that people can come up with as many excuses as they need to preserve their mental image of safety and normalcy.”

Odd couldn’t argue with that.

---

It was around four-thirty in the morning, and Odd could scarcely believe what he was doing. Just because he’d been the one to find Jeremie missing, Professor Hertz and the rest seemed to think he should be the one to lead this...war meeting. Okay yeah, maybe he’d spoken with adults before, as class rep. Maybe they meant they’d be inclined to listen to him...but this was out of his league!

But, well, someone had to grab the reins of leadership, and the other option was nodding off where he stood.

He looked around the physics lab. It was around four-thirty in the morning. William was helping him tape a large sheet of paper to the blackboard...well, holding it up and fighting to keep his eyes open. On the front desk was a laptop, which displayed a video conference with some American woman--Dido, right? Principal Delmas and Professor Hertz sat at the table nearest to the front. Jim Morales, Richard, and the parents of Ulrich, Yumi, and Jeremie, were spread around the room.

Mr. Belpois was hunched over in his chair, head in his hands. Yumi’s parents, clutching hands tightly, didn’t look any better. Odd scowled at Ulrich’s father, who seemed too nonchalant when his son was in danger. Man, Ulrich wasn’t kidding when he said his dad was a chump.

Jim sat next to Mr. Belpois, patting his back. Odd could hear his loud voice booming, “Don’t you worry, Belpois is a smart kid! And he’s trained under me! He’ll be just fine!” The lines of worry etched into his face undermined his words, though.

When William finished helping, he went to his seat and promptly fell asleep. Nobody disturbed him; he’d already heard the plans, and he was exhausted. Odd cleared his throat and forced a chipper tone into his voice. “Ladies and gentleman! For the first time in the history of my adventures and misadventures as a student of this school, I’ll be the one who teaches you!”
Nobody laughed. Many of the adults frowned at him, shooting meaningful glances at the worried parents. Dido in particular had a glare that put tundras to shame.

Odd coughed. “Well...it seems your sense of humor is somewhat, if understandably, lacking. In that case, I’ll get straight to the point.”

Taking a long stick, he pointed at the paper he’d taped up earlier--a huge map of Kadic. “This is, as you can see, our school. After having discovered this morning, when defying the danger, that our friend had been despicably kidnapped…”

“Della Robbia,” Professor Hertz said sternly.

“Fine,” he muttered. “Professor Hertz and I have contacted Dido, who you can see on the screen right there.”

He gestured, and the woman granted them a curt nod. “We’ve come to the conclusion Jeremie was kidnapped by the Green Phoenix, most likely by an agent named Grigory Nictapolus, aka ‘the man with the dogs’. This man is responsible for, among other things, guiding the Green Phoenix to the supercomputer, using a memory-snatching machine on Yumi’s parents, and likely neutralized three of Dido’s secret agents who were keeping the supercomputer’s location under surveillance.

“With his break-in at Kadic, we’ve decided the situation has become too dangerous for the school’s students to stay here. Therefore, Principal Delmas will be making arrangements to send them all home once they wake up in the morning. For those who do not live in the local area or cannot find a place to stay on such short notice, we have to fortify Kadic as much as possible.

“Professor Hertz, Jim, and William did some reconnaissance, and found that Grigory broke in using the manhole in the boiler room, which is always unlocked. Our first step should be to block that entrance, as well as the one in the park, to prevent infiltration. Our next should be to reinforce the walls, close the gates, and create a safe, defensible location for students to hide, should an attack come.

“It’s absolutely paramount that we organize an expedition to the Hermitage. Without the scanner there, we have no way of retrieving my friends or defending the virtual reality from the Green Phoenix. And without Aelita specifically, we have no way to stop XANA’s attacks. And lemme tell you, that’s one guy we do not want to be at the mercy of.”

He laughed, pitch too high. Crap. Could they hear the nervousness still in his voice? He’d hoped cracking a joke would cover it up...

“So, while Principal Delmas and Professor Hertz get the students out, William and Jim will start preparing defenses. Mr. and Mrs. Ishiyama...and Stern…” Stern glared at the lack of ‘mister’ in front of his name. “…you three can help them. Mr. Belpois, Richard, and I will go to the Hermitage. Dido will try to get aid here as soon as she can.” Odd stopped and looked around.

“Any questions?”

_I always wanted to say that._
Her night was uncomfortable, punctuated by constant jerking awake at the slightest noise. By the time her internal clock told her morning had arrived, Aelita felt drained and miserable.

Grudgingly accepting she wasn’t going to get any real sleep, she cracked her eyes open. She looked around. Daddy wasn’t in the lab, and the computer was dark, silent. She didn’t see XANA—either of him. Hesitant, Aelita uncurled herself from the ball and stared at the remote she’d tightly clutched all night. Should she continue without XANA? It wasn’t helping any, to hear his vitriolic commentary about Daddy. But she’d promised to hear him out...

“Good morning,” XANA said, gliding into the room, a paper bag in hand. *Speak of the devil. “Do you want something to eat?”*

She stared. She didn’t know what was more bizarre—the words ‘good morning’ leaving XANA’s mouth, the question about eating, or the notion of eating in the Mirror. “What? How?” she asked intelligently.

He pointed at the remote in her hand. “I’ve studied the system here. That’s more than just a navigational device—you can use it to interact with objects of this world. Although, I can bypass the need for a simple remote by interfacing with the system directly.”

Hence the bag. Aelita did her best not to flinch, yesterday’s argument still fresh in her mind, as he sat beside her. Opening it, he pulled out a buttery pastry. “You still like croissants, right?”

“Yeah…” Her fingers brushed XANA’s when she took the offering. Aelita’s eyes widened as she felt the actual weight of the croissant, texture and everything. An experimental nibble coated her tongue in delicious, flaky bread. “How does this…? Won’t it be missing from where it’s supposed to be?” *Now that was a confusing sentence.*

“No. If we take something from this world, we take a copy, leaving the original in place. If you were to let go of the remote while eating that, it’d disappear.”

Silence settled as she ate. It was…a weird sensation. It didn’t make her feel full, since she wasn’t even hungry. A virtual digestive system, avatars did not have. But the taste was nice, offering a small bit of normalcy

He’d remembered she liked croissants. He’d brought her one. She wasn’t sure how that made her feel. And if she didn’t know her own feelings, how could she trust herself?

How were her friends faring outside? Were Ulrich and Yumi—and Eva—still safe in the First City? What about Jeremie, Odd, and William? What plans were they throwing together even now? They had no way to fight XANA if he got back to Lyoko. Should she be trying to stop him? Was that what was expected of her?

But he hadn’t done anything, not really. Not yet. And…Daddy had created a self-fulfilling prophecy by doing a pre-emptive strike.

*Daddy.* Her throat clogged. Her inability to sleep last night hadn’t even produced a satisfying epiphany, to make it worthwhile. She’d just turned the revelations over and over in her head, trying in vain to find...something. She didn’t know. Something to tell her whose side she should take?

All she’d understood was that the wound this had caused XANA ran deep.

Wiping her fingers on the paper bag, she took a deep breath to psyche herself up. “XANA…”

“Your friends with my other half are fine.” he interrupted. “Tired and bored, but fine.”
“Oh. Thank you.” She twisted her bracelet nervously. “But I was actually going to say...I’m sorry about what Daddy did.”

He blinked. Then, a satisfied kind of smirk curled his lips. “So you admit he was--”

“Whatever caustic comment you’re going to make, don’t.” XANA narrowed his eyes as she held up a hand. “The Mirror is showing me a lot about Daddy that I’m struggling with. I don’t know what to think anymore. But I know...you might not have ended up like this without his actions. And I know you’re still very bitter over them. And I’m sorry.”

For a long moment, he just appraised her. She tried to interpret the look on his face, comparing it to what memories she did have...but the XANA in her memories had been so much more open, emotionally, than this one. She’d seen merriment, joy, excitement. All she’d seen from the current XANA was anger, disdain, and cynicism.

*And softness,* something whispered inside her. *Sometimes, there’s a kind of old softness too.*

No, softness sounded too...well, soft. Maybe fondness? Could she dare hope it was genuine? *Should* she?

Finally, he gave her a short nod—as much acknowledgment or thanks as she would get, she figured. He rose to his feet and spoke brusquely. “Are you ready to continue?”

She stood up and lifted her chin. “Ready as I’ll ever be.”
Steping carefully but swiftly, Odd forged his way through the trees. Behind him, Mr. Belpois and Richard worked together to lug the weight of a cardboard box, full of the material necessary to deconstruct the scanner. It was their hope they by disconnecting it from the Mirror, they could bypass XANA’s interference. With the access codes Dido had given them, they could hook it up to any computer, connect to the First City, and bring back Ulrich, Eva, and Yumi.

Aelita, though...she would be trickier to rescue. His chest constricted as he remembered her staring up at XANA in the Mirror, uncertain but brave, staying so he and William could live. I swear, Princess, we’re gonna get you out of this.

“You two doing okay?” he called back.

“Couldn’t...be...better...” Richard huffed.

“Sorry we couldn’t take the road, but I thought it would be better to stick to the route through the forest. I don’t want to run into any surprises.”

Through the branches above, slivers of sky, gray with pre-dawn morning, peeked down at them. Even though he’d fetched a jacket, the freezing temperature still pierced into Odd’s skin. He rubbed his arms and shivered. He couldn’t help thinking that in a horror movie, this would be the perfect setting for an ambush--

A noise behind him had him whirling around, but it was just Richard. He’d tripped on a tree root and almost dropped the box. With Mr. Belpois’ help, they’d managed to recover enough not to break anything, but the younger adult was now grimacing on the ground. “I think I pulled something,” he said through gritted teeth.

Odd thought fast. “Alright, you two take a break. I’ll scout ahead.”

It felt weird giving orders to adults, especially Jeremie’s dad! But Mr. Belpois hadn’t spoken since he’d heard his son was kidnapped, and Richard was just way too new. Besides, maybe it was weird, but Odd kinda liked taking charge. No wonder Jeremie can be so bossy, if this is what it feels like!

The thought of Jeremie resurrected the knowledge of his situation. Odd felt his good mood sour.

Narrowing his eyes, Odd darted through the trees and bushes as nimble as a cat. If his memory served, the Hermitage wasn’t too far ahead…

A squeaky, metallic noise rang out from the Hermitage’s direction. He froze. His heart began a rapid staccato. Odd waited, listening with bated breath--

There it was again! Odd dropped to the ground and began to crawl, using his elbows like soldiers in films. Hyper-conscious of every noise he was making, he scanned the ground for branches, rocks, and other little annoyances that could betray his position. Each one he saw, he carefully moved aside before continuing.

Reaching the shelter of a bracken bush, Odd eyed it a moment, then crawled in. The sharp little points of its branches dug into his hair, yanking blonde strands from his scalp. He bit down on his instinct to swear in pain. His movements caused the bush to rustle slightly, but he was hoping the cover it provided was enough to outweigh that.
He withdrew a pair of binoculars, brought specifically for scouting purposes, and peered through the little gaps in the branches. There was the Hermitage’s gate, but he only recognized it because of the metal plaque. Behind the gate, a wall of metal planks rose six or seven meters, obscuring all but the roof of the old chalet. Soldiers in camouflage were moving around, transporting more planks, and welding them together with chains and a blowtorch. Each plank was marked with a bird in flight.

Odd actually felt ill. Not only was Jeremie in the Green Phoenix’s hands, they now had Ulrich, Eva, Yumi, and Aelita, too. XANA controlled the Hermitage scanner, so the Green Phoenix couldn’t pull his friends out of their virtual havens…assuming he didn’t let the Green Phoenix rematerialize them. And even if he didn’t, so what? They were still trapped with XANA. Odd and William couldn’t reach them. They were useless.

It was…

Hopeless...

He blinked several times to push away the tears threatening to escape. Odd reached for the blanket of his optimism, but it was threadbare and thin. A poor shelter from the dark winds of depression battering at him.

And then, because of course things could get worse, furious barking reached his ears. Odd would have bet his entire video game supply they belonged to Grigory Nictapolus’s dogs, which meant the man himself wasn’t far away. He froze. Should he crawl away and risk discovery, or stay put and risk discovery? In his current state, both options seemed equally hopeless.

The barks increased in volume. Plants rustled. Something thudded against the ground, like footsteps but lighter…

Oh no.

Through the tangle of leaves and branches, Odd watched two sets of enormous black paws stop right outside his hiding spot. Deep bays and howls rent the air, punctuated with the occasional snarl. Occasionally, the paws darted forward, then back, as if—as if the dogs were trying to get at him through the bush.

A pair of shiny black boots entered his vision. “Hannibal, Scipio.” Immediately, the two dogs quieted and sat.

“You, in the bush.” Odd stopped breathing. Sweat trickled down his forehead and into his eyes. He didn’t dare move to swipe it away. “You’re one of those Lyoko brats, aren’t you?”

For once in his life, he kept his mouth shut.

“Answer me, or else… Well, my dogs are a little hungry.”

“Yeah,” he said. His voice cracked.

“Ah, that’s…Odd Della Robbia, isn’t it? Very good. Now, I want you to take a message back to Major Steinback…no, what is she called here…? Professor Hertz, that’s right.”

A message?

“Tell her that the Green Phoenix is creating a base of operations in Paris, and that the Hermitage is now part of our territory. The secret room as well. If you guys back out and mind your own
business, we won’t have to hurt you. Understood?”

Several witty comments were born and died in Odd’s brain in the span of a second. “Understood,” he said, but his fists clenched. I understand you’re holding almost all my friends hostage and a dangerous weapon, and that I can’t let you get away with it!

Nictapolous laughed and walked away, taking his monster dogs with him. He’d intended to cow Odd, and for a while it had succeeded...but that sheer arrogance at the end...well, Odd felt like he should thank him.

After all, he’d just reignited the dying flames in Odd’s chest.

---

June 5th, 1994

She took in her surroundings. This time, they were in the Hermitage’s living room. A glance outside told her the sun was past its zenith. Her past self was lying on the couch, eyes closed, breathing even, a cool cloth on her forehead. Daddy was in a nearby armchair, working on his laptop.

But for some reason, he wasn’t moving.

She glanced at XANA and saw he was staring up. Did he Pause the scene? “XANA?”

He looked down and gave her a thin smile. “It’s nothing. Just dealing with some annoyances outside.”

Her pulse quickened. “My friends are not--” she started hotly.

“It’s not them,” he interrupted. “The people outside are decent hackers, but hardly Belpois. I could hold them off in my sleep.”

Does he sleep? Wait...he said... “If it’s not my friends, who are they?”

“The Mirror isn’t connected to cameras, or Belpois’ circuit loop, so I can’t see for sure...but I calculate a 96.7043% chance it’s the Green Phoenix.”

Aelita inhaled sharply. “Here? Is there--they can’t reach us, can they?”

“They’re trying to break past my interference...but they’re not going to. You’re safe.”

Safe. Yes, oddly enough, she felt that she was safer here, with XANA, than if she were to be rematerialized out there. Aelita shuddered at the thought of being at the mercy of the man with the dogs. And that wasn’t even including what they might want to use her for! Her relation to Daddy, her knowledge of programming, her experience as a Lyoko Warrior...all of it made her both valuable and a threat to a group interested in using the supercomputer.

But she wasn’t the only one in danger. “If the Green Phoenix tries to rematerialize my friends, could you interfere then, too?”
XANA sighed. “Yes, very well. Now let’s focus on the main event.”

He waved his hand, and the scene began to play. Her younger self stirred and cracked open her eyelids.

“Aelita, you’re awake. How are you feeling?” Daddy asked.

“I have a really bad headache,” she murmured.

“That’s because of the memory-snatching machine,” Daddy said, turning his gaze away from the laptop and smiling at her. “I’ve never used it in the opposite way before. But I’m sure it’ll wear off soon enough.”

Past-Aelita absorbed that. She frowned. Blinked rapidly in succession. Squinted. “I...what time is it? I think I need to visit a boy...”

“Richard?”

“No...someone else.”

“There’s no one else. Richard is your only male friend.”

Aelita stared. A black hole seemed to have opened up in her chest. All light and good feelings were just...sucked away.

*He...really did use that glove on me. He really...erased my memories...*

Her knees buckled. She would have crumpled if XANA hadn’t caught her. She leaned into him, needing the support of another person. Her eyes just wouldn’t look away from the betrayal playing out before her.

*Why...why did XANA have to be right...?*

Her past self nodded slowly. “I see...” Suddenly, she grimaced. “Ah!”

“Aelita?” Alarm crossed Daddy’s face. “What’s wrong?”

Past-Aelita’s eyes welled with tears. She gingerly touched her head. “My head...it just started hurting more...”

“Hold on, I’ll get you some pain medicine.”

Hurriedly, Daddy set his laptop aside and fetched two tablets of Ibuprofen and a glass of water. After she’d taken them, past-Aelita asked. “Did you finish the secret room yesterday, Daddy? And falsifying your diary? I...I know I sound stupid, but I can’t remember...”

Daddy knelt by the couch and took her hand. “You don’t sound stupid, Aelita. And yes, on both accounts. The Broulet brothers built the walls that hide the first and second rooms; it’s very unlikely anyone will become aware of their existence. My journal has been edited to exclude all mention of our other friends and the most dangerous of my work. Should the men in black find it, no one else will get hurt. But if they don’t, there’s enough genuine research there to help you.”

A moment of silence passed. “Can I tell you something, Daddy?” Past-Aelita’s voice was a hushed whisper. “I’m scared I’ll forget everything... It feels like pieces of my memory are trying to fly away and leave me.”
Tenderly, Daddy hugged her. “Don’t worry. Besides my virtual journal, I’ve left a video in the secret room, and a notebook in the attic. It has a map in invisible ink to guide you to the room.”

“So...you really think I could forget everything? Even what you’re telling me now?”

Daddy looked away, a dark shadow crossing his face. “Even if you do, I’m positive your subconscious will lead you back here.” He finally said. “You’re a special girl, Aelita, smart and intuitive. You’ll find the clues, and everything will be alright. I promise.”

Her past self’s smile became faint. “Mmkay. I trust you, Daddy...”

Past-Aelita’s voice was weak, the words slurred together. Her eyes drooped shut. Hopper kissed her forehead, rose, and returned to his work. His precious work, for which he’d taken advantage of his daughter’s trust--

Aelita squeezed her eyes shut as if that would scrub everything she’d seen and heard from her brain.

“That’s the last one.” XANA’s voice was low in her ear. “The rest of this day is recorded, but Hopper never recorded his memories from June 6th, 1994.”

“Just take me away,” she whispered.

And so he did.

---

Sissi knew something was up.

Whispers and rumors floated in the hall; about Odd Della Robbia shouting that Jeremie Belpois had been kidnapped early in the morning, about Daddy’s sudden cancellation of the school day, about ‘preparations’ a rare few had caught a glimpse of.

Even this early in the morning, gossip spread like wildfire.

And that was why Sissi marched into Daddy’s office right after breakfast, put her hands on her hips, and demanded in a loud voice, “Daddy, what’s going on?”.

He raised a finger-- raised a finger! --and continued speaking on the phone. “…arrange transportation as soon as possible. Yes. Thank you.”

He listened a moment more, repeated “Thank you,” and hung up. With a sigh, he laced his fingers and peered up at Sissi. She could see the veins popping out against his skin. Wrinkles spread from his drooping eyes, emphasizing the bags underneath. With a start, she realized her father actually looked old. “Sissi, please, I don’t have time right now...”

“Oh really? And why not?”

“Running a school is a difficult business, you understand…”

“Sure, but you’ve always had time for me before.” Firmly, she sat on the corner of his desk, establishing that she wasn’t going to leave any time soon. Crossing her arms, Sissi continued,
“Something about today is different, and I wanna know what.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking…”

“Suddenly cancelling school. Teachers moving strange things to strange places. And there are rumors about Jeremie Belpois being kidnapped right out of his room.”

Daddy flinched, and she knew, suddenly, that last one was true. Sissi gasped. “Oh my Lord, he was. Jeremie’s in trouble?! We--We have to call the police! We have to warn--”

“Sissi, keep your voice down!” Daddy looked around as though people would burst into his room at any moment. “I’ve already spoken to...authorities. They’re handling it. But please, be discrete! I don’t want to start a panic among the student body!”

Daddy’s door creaked open, and they both froze. A male voice called, “Principal Delmas, we finished--”

The speaker stopped. Whipping her head around, Sissi narrowed her eyes. William Dunbar was standing there, staring at her, flabbergasted. He’s flabbergasted? He’s the one walking in Daddy’s office like he has actual business…

Her train of thought stopped. A lightbulb turned on. She looked between him and her father, suddenly feeling betrayed. So Daddy’s in on their secret too. “Well. I see what’s going on.”

Pushing off the desk, she stomped to the door--

“Wait.”

A large, warm hand grabbed her arm. Sissi growled. “I told you, Dunbar, don’t --”

“I’ll tell you what’s going on.”

She couldn’t stop herself from gasping at the sudden surge of hope, even as her father spluttered, “Mr. Dunbar, what do you think--I refuse to allow my daughter to be placed in any danger--”

William met Daddy’s gaze evenly. “Your daughter is a lot smarter than you give her credit for. She’s already figured out something is up with us, and I’d bet she’s guessed something’s up with you, too. Pushing her away is only going to hurt her more.”

Without waiting for Daddy’s answer, he stepped in, closed the door, and locked it. William moved his hand to hers and tugged. She didn’t resist, letting him guide her to the chairs in front of Daddy’s desk.

They sat, but for some reason, he didn’t let go of her hand. Studying him, Sissi realized he looked...strange. His face screamed he was exhausted, but his other hand kept jittering nervously on his leg, like he was overdosed on caffeine.

She opened her mouth, meaning to ask, “Are you okay? What really came out was “Why? You said you couldn’t betray your friends again.” What are you doing?! Why are you still being bitchy?! He’s giving you what you wanted!

William ran a hand through his hair. “Things have...changed. We’re in a very difficult situation right now. Odd and I are the only ones left, and we could use all the help we could get.”

“What? What do you mean?” Then the word left sunk in, and her heart seized. Does he mean…
“Wait, are Ulrich and Yumi and all of them d-dead?”

“I don’t know.” His grip on her hand tightened, not like he was trying to be cute and playful, but like...like he needed to be grounded to reality.

“Sissi...what I’m about to tell you is gonna sound strange. I need you to swear you won’t tell anyone.”

“I promise,” she said.

“No.” She inhaled. William had lifted his head and was staring deeply into her eyes. His were a blazing, gray fire. “I need you to really mean it. The guys didn’t want to tell you because they knew you would run to the authorities. Some of the authorities already know now, but I’m sure Jeremie and the others would still doubt whether you could keep quiet.

“Because this secret is going to drag you into a dark place. You’ll face threats to your life. You’ll be terrified, and you’ll see and learn things you wish you could unsee and unlearn. And this is coming from someone who joined last, who only has to face fragmented memories. The rest of them, they have the full experience. The experience you’ll have. So, knowing all that, I want you to think about whether you want to swear yourself into that life.”

She did. She genuinely thought about the weight of the secret he wanted to entrust on her. How much danger he was implying she’d face. How hard living that life would be. When she thought about it, her instinct was to shy away.

But then she looked at him, with his shoulders hunched and his face worn and his hand sweaty, and thought about how much it must be weighing him down.

And Sissi realized...wanting to know wasn’t about wanting to be ‘in’. It was about shouldering some of his--some of their-- burden.

“I swear on my life.”

Even though Daddy’s room didn’t have an echo, to Sissi...her vow seemed to reverberate off the walls in that moment. It was like it was more than just a vow. Something sacred. A covenant.

William nodded slowly. Then, to her surprise, he smiled. “I thought you would.”

He really believed in her that much? Even after she’d slapped him and said all those mean things? Sissi felt her cheeks warm.

William lifted his head, blowing out air. He looked like he was searching for where to start. Then he said, “Have you ever had dreams that feel like memories? Dreams involving our classmates trying to kill you, or weird ‘freak accidents’, or machinery coming to life?”

Sissi’s jaw dropped. Her baton spiraling into the sky and never landing...mechanical Kiwis advancing towards her...kissing Ulrich on a bridge... “...How did you...?”

He met her brown eyes with his gray. “I’ve had them too, and let me tell you: they’re not dreams.”

---
His mouth felt full of cotton. That was the first thing Jeremie noticed when his senses returned, slowed and muddled. The second was that there was something rough pressing on his hands and feet.

He cracked his eyes opened and looked down. He didn’t have his glasses, but it didn’t really matter because it was dark anyway. The position of his arms told him they were behind his back. Experimentally wiggling his fingers and rubbing his ankles together, he guessed he was tied up in a chair. The room smelled of dust.

This...was not a situation one wanted to wake up to.

The first stirrings of fear crept up on him, but Jeremie pushed them back. Freak out later. Be logical now. What had happened? What was the last thing he remembered?

He cast his mind back. He’d been intently focusing on his laptop when suddenly, a hand had pressed something strange-smelling over his mouth. Taken totally off-guard, Jeremie hadn’t managed more than an inefficient flail before falling into darkness.

That had been sometime around...midnight? Judging by the growling of his stomach and the need pressing on his bladder, it was several hours past that. Probably morning, possibly lunch.

His heart began to beat faster. Someone had broken into his room and kidnapped him. XANA? No, XANA would have just killed him. That left--

A door creaked, and he whipped his head in the sound’s direction. Suddenly, light! He squeezed his eyes shut. His retinas burned; he’d been working in darkness, and woken up in darkness...so naturally, his eyes had adjusted to that.

Footsteps approached. “They didn’t give you back your glasses yet, did they? Here.”

The voice was feminine, soft, and friendly. He felt delicate fingers place the frames of his glasses on his nose. Figuring he could open his eyes now, he did so.

He found himself looking into the face of a woman. Her age was hard to place; her face was smooth, but her hair was completely gray. Her eyes were blue, and she didn’t wear makeup. Something about her looked familiar, but he couldn’t put his finger on it.

The woman stepped away, allowing him to see she was wearing jeans, a shirt stamped with a bird in flight, and a lab coat. “I’m Hera. What’s your name?”

“Jeremie,” he said, even though it was pointless. If the Green Phoenix--and this must be them, that emblem on her shirt further proved it--had kidnapped him, they must already know who he was.

“Don’t be scared, Jeremie. Everything’s going to be okay. All you have to do is cooperate with us for a little, and we’ll let you go right back to school.”

He couldn’t hold back his scoff. “Even if I believed you, I wouldn’t help a bunch of terrorists.”

Hera frowned, and when she spoke her voice was strained. “Please, don’t make such rash declarations. My boss, Hannibal Mago...he’ll do whatever it takes to get what he wants. I’ve been checking up on you every hour. Now that you’re awake, he’s going to want to see you.”

Jeremie inhaled sharply. His pulse began to skyrocket again. Mago had gone to the effort of kidnapping him and now wanted to meet him in person…and he was powerless. Frustration flooded him alongside the fear.
“I don’t want to see someone as young as you get hurt, so I’m asking you to please be careful.”

She seemed sincere, but perhaps that was part of Mago’s scheme. Present Hera as a ‘good cop’ while he played ‘bad cop’.

Hera withdrew a small utility knife from her coat and approached. As she cut through his bonds, Jeremie mentally psyched himself.

It was time to meet Mago.
Hera allowed him to run to the bathroom, but he was escorted inside by soldiers. As soon as he was done, he was none-too-gently pushed back out to her. She took his elbow and led him away, the soldiers following, guns trained on his back. Jeremie tried not to dwell on that, instead studying his environment. If he was to have a chance of escape, he needed to get his bearings.

He’d been held in a director’s office upstairs, which led to a metallic walkway suspended several meters above the ground floor. The area below was filled with large steel containers, sandbags, tents, cables, technicians moving to and fro, and soldiers. Next to the elevator was an enormous, green Bedouin tent.

Hera led him to the ground floor, using a slow-moving escalator the Green Phoenix must have installed, instead of risking the factory’s decaying staircase. She then led him to the Bedouin tent. Straining his ears, Jeremie could hear a raised voice coming from the inside.

“...don’t care what they have to do, I want them to find a way around that static! I know Hopper has secrets in that computer, and they’re not leaving that house until they find them!”

*Sounds like XANA’s giving them trouble.* Jeremie couldn’t resist a smirk. It didn’t outweigh the horror of his return, but it was nice to someone else to be on the receiving end of XANA, for once.

A second voice, also male, asked, “Should I go back to personally encourage them?”

“Not yet. Go check if Hera and the brat are here yet.”

A man with short hair emerged from the tent. He wore a leather trench coat and held the leashes for two enormous Rottweilers.

“Grigory Nictapolous,” Jeremie greeted coolly.

The man smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “The boss is waiting for you. A pleasure to see you again, runt.”

“I wish I could say the same.”

A rough bark of laughter burst from Nictapolous’s throat. “Hah! You’ve got spirit, kid. But it won’t do you any good. We’ve already won.”

What did he mean by that? Jeremie felt his brain leap into overdrive, trying to analyze every possible hidden meaning. Had they found some other way to use the First City? Hurt his friends? Overcome Dido?

To Jeremie’s surprise, Nictapolous returned to the tent. Before following, Hera whispered to Jeremie, “Don’t mess with him, either. He’s too dangerous.”

Then she tugged him through the entrance flap. Jeremie looked around. The interior of the tent, contrary to the outside, was covered in thick, lush carpet, lavish pillows, and finely-crafted furniture. The strong aromas of various spices hung in the air. On a pile of cushions strategically placed in the middle was Hannibal Mago, dressed in an orange three-piece suit and matching hat. His legs were crossed, his feet bare, and his olive skin had a somewhat paled complexion.

“Mago, sir,” Hera said, bowing. “I’ve brought you the boy Jeremie.”
“Grigory, you stay. Hera, leave us.”

She bowed again and did, not even looking at Jeremie. Fine. He could do this on his own. Silence stretched out as he and Mago sized each other up.

This was the man who had kidnapped Aelita’s mother so long ago. The man almost as responsible for Lyoko’s creation as Hopper. The man whose desire to steal it birthed a chain of events that trapped Aelita and Hopper on Lyoko.

A surge of anger on Aelita’s behalf coursed through him. In a move of sheer, stupid defiance, Jeremie decided to greet him with his real name. “Hello, Mark Hollenback.”

Mago smiled, and in the lamplight, his canines glittered gold. “You can work without a tongue, boy. So if you want to keep it, never address me by that name again.”

Ice water trickled down Jeremie’s spine. His throat closed, robbing him of a response. The silence hung there like an unwelcome guest.

“What did you find that information?” Mago finally asked, tilting his head.

Jeremie couldn’t see the harm in telling him, but kept things vague. “When Professor Hopper moved to Paris, someone gave him a file about you.”

“I see. I assume it mentioned my possession of Anthea Schaeffer?” The young teen nodded. “Good. I love laying out all the cards on the table. Now, let’s get straight to business, my young friend.”

Mago rested laced fingers on his lap and leaned forward. “I came to this disgusting hovel to enter Lyoko, but I’ve run into a small problem.”

Jeremie couldn’t resist smiling. “Your men can’t enter the virtual world because they’re adults.”

A thunderous expression crossed Mago’s face at the interruption. Smoothly, he rose. He wasn’t a particularly muscular man—in fact, his suit swelled with a bit of a gut—but he was tall. Jeremie tried to back up, but suddenly Grigory twisted his arms behind his back and held him in place.

Pain exploded along his face as Mago backhanded him. He felt the rings open cuts on his cheek, which started to ooze blood. He gasped, instinctively tried to raise a hand to touch the wounds, felt Grigory’s grip grow painfully tight.

“That was a warning for interrupting me,” Mago said, settling back in his seat. “But yes, you’re correct. I sent a small team in, but none of them could take a single step. Hopper, apparently, was the only adult capable of surviving on Lyoko.”

Jeremie felt the metallic tang of blood on his tongue and realized his lip had been cut too. He resisted the urge to wet his lips, instead trying to gauge how much Mago knew. He’d referred to Hopper with the past tense; did he know the professor was dead?

“And that’s where you come in. You will enter Lyoko and follow my instructions precisely. You will do me a little favor, one that will take but a moment. All you’ll have to do is open a door for me.”

A door? Entering Lyoko? His stomach churned, and he shook his head. “I...I can’t go to Lyoko.”

Silence. Once again, Mago rose and stepped closer. Jeremie had to look up into his face, allowing him to catch a glimpse of Mago’s eyes. They were as black as coal. “I didn’t ask you. I ordered you. Otherwise...”
Jeremie flinched when Mago moved his hand, but all he did was reach into a pocket. He withdrew a pendant and held it up, letting the light catch off it. Jeremie gasped—it was gold, with a sailor’s knot and the letters W and A inscribed on it. “...little Aelita Schaeffer will find herself an orphan.”

---

“That was a waste of time,” Ulrich grumbled.

They had followed Hopper around the First City all night, or at least what felt like all night. The recording had detoured to the stupidest places and talked about the dummest things. But neither he nor Yumi had wanted to leave XANA alone with him. What if there was some message or treasure at the end that Hopper wanted to leave out of the AI’s hands?

But no. There was nothing. They’d been led back to the gate and the recording had fizzled out.

The area near the gate was a wide avenue filled with shops and a spacious cobblestone road. He sat on the ground, stretching his legs out to rub out the soreness. Nearby, Yumi moaned as she started doing likewise. The reluctantly third member of their party remained where he stood, arms still crossed, an odd twist to his lips.

Actually, for someone who’d just had his time wasted, XANA wasn’t looking upset at all. Ulrich frowned.

If XANA wasn’t upset...it must be because he felt his time wasn’t wasted. Which meant they’d missed something. But what?

“If you say so,” the AI said cryptically, furthering Ulrich’s suspicions. XANA finally moved, stepping closer to the sealed doors and studying them.

He didn’t say anything, only stretched out a hand. A panel, like the one Aelita often used, appeared before him. But when he pressed his palm to it, nothing happened. Now a disgruntled expression crossed his face.

Interest sparked as Ulrich watched XANA walk past the panel and touch the doors directly. Blue lightning crackled across his hand. XANA held it there for a few moments, as if not really in pain, before he relented. His scowl deepened. “Worth a try.”

“You forgot,” Ulrich realized. XANA slowly turned to face him, dangerously expressionless. “You forgot that you can’t go to Lyoko, because it’s offline.”

“Or if it’s online, then you can’t open the gate from this side.” Yumi caught on. “You’re trapped here.”

And they had to do everything they could to keep it that way. If the channel between Lyoko and the First City reopened, XANA would be able to use the castle as a weapon again. He would recover all his strength and try to destroy the world again.

“A minor inconvenience,” XANA said. “All I need to do is leave and open the gate from Lyoko’s side.”

“Oh really? And how do you plan to...”
Ulrich trailed off as XANA smirked darkly. “As it so happens, I have some candidates for possession right here.”

They both leapt to their feet. XANA chuckled. “You have to know it’s futile to resist. This city is my playground. I can do everything I could on Lyoko, and more.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Ulrich spat. “We won’t let you return to power.”

Yumi, at the same time, said just as fiercely, “We will always stand against anyone who wants to abuse the supercomputer, whether that’s the Green Phoenix or you!”

For a moment, he just studied them, head cocked. “You know,” he finally said, “your determination may be frustrating and futile, but there’s actually something admirable about it.”

Suddenly, clouds of smoke streamed through Ulrich’s hands. He jumped as the smoke thickened and solidified, taking the shape of his katanas. A glance to the side showed Yumi was now staring at her fans, slack-jawed.

“You genuinely have my respect as warriors,” XANA said. “So for that, I’ll allow you your weapons.”

With that, he held one hand out, fingers curving like he was trying to grasp air. With another burst of smoke, an enormous curved scimitar appeared in his hand. Its blade was as red as blood, and his Eye formed the crossguard.

His smirk widened. For a moment, his canines seemed elongated. “You’ll need them.”

---

Jeremie stumbled as he was roughly pushed into the scanner. “Don’t try anything stupid,” the soldier who’d done so warned.

Doing something reckless and stupid hadn’t even crossed his mind. The room was filled with soldiers, all armed with sub-machine guns. They were positioned in a circle around the scanners, and all their eyes were on him.

Only when the scanners doors slid shut did Jeremie allow himself to bow his head. He felt sick to his stomach. Help terrorists, or be responsible for Aelita’s mother’s death. His brain tripped, scrambled over itself as it pulled out idea after idea on how to escape, each more ludicrous than the last.

*Deliberately fail on Lyoko--and get Anthea killed.*

*Find and rescue Anthea--oh yeah, while I’m in Lyoko, sure, that’s a great idea.*

*Devirtualize myself so I can find Anthea--and I’ll just get sent right back in.*

*Send out an electronic SOS--how?! I don’t have any equipment!*

*Get to the supercomputer room and activate a Return to the Past to escape--assuming I don’t get shot by all these guards before I get there.*
Maybe I can activate a tower once I’m in Lyoko—ugh, no, I’m not Aelita!

Some genius he was.

Hera’s smooth voice interrupted his self-berating. “Alright, Jeremie, we’re going to begin the transfer. I’ve figured out how to virtualize you into Sector 5, so that’s where you’ll appear. Then—”

“I know how this works,” he said curtly.

“Alright, then let’s begin. Transfer, Jeremie… Scanner, Jeremie…”

He flinched, still not liking the virtualization process, as he felt himself rise. Air gusted in his face, tossing his head back and sending his hair flying. The interior of the scanner began to brighten, until it was too painful to keep his eyes open.

“Virtualization.”

Jeremie inhaled, realized he was starting to fall, and panicked. His limbs flailed. Instead of landing on his feet like all his friends could, he belly-flopped painfully into the ground. He didn’t get up. He knew the soldiers in reality were laughing. Instead, he kept his eyes squeezed close and let the misery and embarrassment flood through him. Maybe he could just lay here forever and not face his life.

He started when he heard a snicker in his ear. “I...I’m sorry, Jeremie,” Hera said. “That was mean of me. I don’t think the fall hurt you, though. So please get up; we don’t want to keep Mago waiting.”

So that was what it felt like on the other end of the mic. How disorienting.

With a sigh, he slowly opened his eyes and pushed to his feet. He felt completely dead inside as he stared at the stupid green slippers and their stupid curved tips. His legs were clad in green tights, and he wore a green tunic. A belt cinched around his waist, holding a dagger. He didn’t touch them, but he knew his ears were pointed, and that a silly green cap with a red feather was on his head.

It wasn’t fair. Ulrich became a samurai on Lyoko. William became a warrior straight out of a video game. Even XANA got to be a knight. Jeremie? Jeremie became a ridiculous little elf in green tights.

“Alright, Jeremie. I’m going to guide you to the interface panel. When you leave this room…”

Why, oh why had he removed the security measures when he’d recreated Sector 5? He could have pretended to be slow and let them destroy him. Sure, the Green Phoenix would probably just send him back in, but at least it would stall. Instead, his travel was unhindered. Even XANA’s monsters weren’t there anymore.

Begrudgingly following Hera’s directions, his travel through Sector 5 was eerily quiet, but uneventful. In some time, Jeremie arrived at the very same place Franz Hopper had died. A shiver trailed up his spine, and he felt unnervingly like he’d walked on someone’s grave. Which was, of course, a ridiculous superstition. The dead didn’t care, nor would they haunt you for doing such a thing.

But still.

“Now what?” he asked.
“There should be a bridge somewhere near the panel. You’ll need to cross it, then open the door on the other side.”

“There’s no bridge here. Just emptiness all around!” He felt hope surge through him. Maybe, just maybe, they hadn’t found it?

“I see that. Step closer and the panel should appear. There’s a command you’re supposed to enter to summon the bridge.”

His hope shriveled like a flower in winter. With slumped shoulders, he stepped closer to the edge of the platform. Sure enough, the luminous screen Aelita so often used appeared.

He looked up. “I don’t have the Annex Program,” he tried one last time.

“You won’t need it. From my research, the Code to summon the bridge can either be entered in the interface, or directly from the supercomputer. All you need to do is stand in that exact spot, and all I need is the password.”

Dammit, she really had studied the system. “Well, I hope you know it.”

She sighed, and he shivered—the sound was right in his ear and felt so weird! “Jeremie, please. Cooperate. You studied Franz Hopper longer than me; do you have any ideas what the password might be?”

He really, really wanted to say no. It was right on the tip of his tongue. But Mago’s hand, the dangling pendant, flashed across his mind’s eye again. “... little Aelita Schaeffer will find herself an orphan.”

Would failing to open the bridge count as non-cooperation in Mago’s eyes? Probably. He closed his eyes in defeat. “Hopper wanted to make the First City into a safe place, especially for his daughter. It was her secret play spot. Try Aelita,” he said, the words tasting like betrayal.

Several moments passed, and at first nothing happened. He wasn’t sure whether he dared to hope he was wrong or not, when--

His feet lifted off the platform. His heartbeat jumped. He waved his arms in alarm. It worked!

Jeremie forced himself to drop his arms and hold still, as he was lifted up and carried beyond even Sector 5.
Mantas circled overhead like vultures—a warning for them to not try flying away. Metal clanged as two figures whirled around each other. Despite only having one sword, XANA was easily keeping up with Ulrich’s katanas. He even had the audacity to be smirking. Smoke, threaded through with glowing red, curled in his left hand. Ulrich kept an eye on it—if the red grew stronger, it meant he was going to throw a projectile that was kind of similar to Aelita’s Energy Fields. If the red weakened, it meant he was going to throw smoke.

XANA had probably noticed that he’d figured that out. He also probably didn’t care.

He was just playing with them, after all.

That thought made rage spike in Ulrich. He gritted his teeth and brought his katanas down in two overhead strikes. Stupid move—XANA caught Ulrich’s blades in the curve of his own and yanked up. He was taller than Ulrich—Ulrich’s arms were forced to follow the motion, and he was forced to his tiptoes. His torso was completely open. XANA raised his left hand, Energy Field ready—

He yanked it back as a fan whizzed through the spot it had been previously. With a scoff, XANA turned to smoke a second before Yumi’s second fan would have cut him in two. Freed, Ulrich staggered back. “Thanks!” he shouted.

If she replied, he didn’t hear it, as he threw one katana at the smoke coiling away. XANA was rematerializing—he was going to get him!—

A transparent crystal pillar shot out of the ground, intercepting his katana. It quivered, the tip of its blade mere centimeters from XANA’s face.

The bastard smirked.

“Super Sprint!” Ulrich yelled, crossing the distance in the blink of an eye and snatching up his sword before XANA could take it. As he yanked his katana out, a blood-red scimitar swept through the pillar, grazing his stomach. Ulrich leapt to the side as the pillar, cut clean through, fell over.

The ground shook.

He didn’t have time to get his bearings because XANA was suddenly right in front of him, swinging his scimitar diagonally. Ulrich parried, riposted, and was parried. He leaned back to avoid a horizontal swipe. XANA twisted to avoid his two counter-attacks. Ulrich ducked under an Energy Field and swiped at XANA’s legs. The AI jumped, right in the path of Yumi’s fans.

A sudden gust of wind blew the fans off-course. Behind him, Ulrich heard Yumi swear.

XANA landed and brought his scimitar down. Ulrich caught it between his katanas. For a moment, the two teens struggled, pushing to break the blade block.

“You’re good,” he grunted.

XANA didn’t reply. Suddenly, the ground under Ulrich lurched. He lost his balance. Shouted as he fell backwards. Looked up in time to see a red blade falling right towards him—

Managed to roll to the side. The scimitar was close enough he could see his face reflected in its blade. He used his momentum to get back to his feet, shaking his head. XANA pulled his sword free and, twirling it, attacked again.
The flight was fast. Far too fast. Walls were pressing in on him, narrower and narrower. An enormous feeling of claustrophobia overwhelmed him, and he felt his organs turn inside out.

And then suddenly, the walls were gone. He blinked, finding himself staring at a flat blue sky. For a moment, everything seemed to hang in balance; he looked around and saw that he was in the air, a bridge far below, a black smudge on the horizon. Absolute silence draped over him, and the air was still. It was almost peaceful.

Then he began to fall.

Jeremie screamed as he dropped like a rock. Once again, he tried to get his body to land on its feet, and once again, he fell flat on his face. He felt himself dry heave, his non-existent stomach apparently deciding it was done.

When his convulsions stopped, he pushed to his feet and looked around. Behind him was a well of sorts; he must have shot out of it like a cork from a bottle of champagne. The well was dark blue and descended endlessly below. Ahead of him was a long silver bridge, flat and without guardrails. He dared to peek over the side and shuddered. A bottomless black abyss yawned back at him. Either that led to the Digital Sea...or somewhere worse.

Thanks, Hopper.

He stepped back. Looked at the enormous bridge, stretching for...miles.

*Maybe I should ask for the Overwing or something?* But then, he hadn’t piloted it--or any of their vehicles--before. With an enormous abyss underneath him, he figured now wasn’t the time to try learning.

With a sigh, he began to run.

---

Yumi felt the ground move under her feet and threw herself backwards. It cost her balance and she fell, but mere moments later, a giant crystal spike shot up where she’d just been. She grit her teeth and forced herself back to her feet.

Forty or so meters away, XANA was still clashing swords with Ulrich. He wasn’t paying much attention to her, except to dodge or send the occasional Energy Field her way--or so she’d thought. That spike was a reminder to not let her guard down.

Flicking her fans open, she spun to add more momentum and flung them through the air. Their high-pitched whine announced their trail, and XANA was already waving his free hand dismissively. Wind ripped through the area, carrying her fans away. It wasn’t like the last times, though--this was a real gale, the kind of high-speed winds that you didn’t go out in. Ulrich dug a katana into the ground to stay standing; Yumi wasn’t so lucky.
She shouted in pain as she was flung into a building again. Dizzy, Yumi blinked, shook her head and began to look for her fans. There, on the other end of the avenue. Grimacing, she stood to retrieve them.

Her ears picked up a familiar sound, and she cartwheeled aside instinctively. She just barely caught a glimpse of a red Energy Field blasting through the spot she’d been; then she threw herself inside the store she’d recently slammed into.

Hunching for cover, she peered through the glass window to the outside. Her fans were ten meters away. An impossibly close, impossibly far ten meters. It’s hopeless, she thought despairingly.

They couldn’t even get close to touching XANA. Once he got tired of playing, he’d possess them. Then he’d return to Lyoko and their war would start up again. How would their friends fare, with two of their own down? What about her family? Her throat clogged and the thought of how they’d feel threatened to overwhelm her, but she forced it down.

Even if it was hopeless, she would give this battle her full attention. Or else how could she say she’d done all she could?

She closed her eyes and concentrated. Her fans wiggled in place. She mentally tugged, harder, harder --

They shot from the ground and flew towards her! Exhaling in relief, she opened her hands and caught them.

And then, as she turned to rejoin the fight, she saw it.

The Scyphozoa. It was serenely floating by, having just turned the corner of the street.

Yumi swore and sent her fans at it, first one, then the other. The creature listed to the side, dodging the first, but also putting itself in the path of the next. It wasn’t agile enough to dodge again, and several of its tentacles fell to the ground. Her fans boomeranged back, and Yumi nimbly snatched them out of the air.

The Scyphozoa hesitated, then--to her surprise--retreated. Yumi frowned and looked around her environment, trying to find any alleyways it could ambush her from. Stores on her left; more stores on the other side of the street to her right. Maybe they had back doors, but unless the Scyphozoa knew how to shrink, there was no way it could fit through them.

*Then why? I haven’t injured it enough to make it retreat, have I? And come to think of it, why am I only just seeing it now? Shouldn’t it have been waiting for its master to drive one of us to it?*

*Unless it was...somewhere...else...*

“Fuck!” she swore.

Her sudden outburst startled Ulrich, who glanced over and only barely managed to dodge XANA’s next swing. “Wh--”

“Eva!”

XANA started laughing as her boyfriend let out a few choice words of his own. Instead of pressing his attack, he stepped backwards, scimitar dissipating. “Some heroes you are. Forgetting all about the innocent you need to protect, because you’re more concerned about yourselves. Then again, that’s typical of humans.”
Yumi didn’t know what hit harder: his words, or the realization they’d been played. *This was a distraction! This was all a distraction!*

“Anyway, it’s been fun. But now it’s game over.”

Ulrich let out a scream of rage and charged. But his katanas only sliced through smoke as XANA’s avatar melted away.

---

Miranda Beauchamp ordinarily liked her job. Being a technician in the Green Phoenix was lowly enough to avoid directly interacting with Mago or one of his lieutenants, but cushy enough to keep her and her family well-off. Her husband and children were, of course, in the dark as to who exactly she worked for, but it was for the best. She got to work with the computers she loved and occasionally she traveled to some neat places. As long as she never thought too closely about what her company was doing, she was happy.

This was one of the times she did not like her job.

Miranda sighed, running a hand through her short black hair and leaning forward to squint at the screen of her laptop. The dark-skinned woman was at her wits end, as were her co-workers. When this creepy old place was deemed ‘Green Phoenix territory’, she had been among those assigned to it. While soldiers guarded the entrance and other workers combed through the belongings upstairs, she and the technicians wrestled with what lay hidden in the basement.

A scanner! A virtual world! A cornucopia of knowledge and secrets, right there before their eyes! She’d been delighted the moment she saw it, her inner programmer itching to crack it open and find what beautiful codes lay within.

And that had been exactly her orders. Some whispered they were supposed to find kids supposedly hiding in the virtual world, but Miranda resolutely ignored them. Whatever their fate was, it wasn’t her concern. All she had to do was her job, and that was simple.

Or so she’d thought. From the moment they first loaded up their equipment to now, hours later, they had been opposed. A thick blanket of interference prevented them from connecting to either scanner or computer, and they just couldn’t solve it. The few times someone broke through, it was for a scant few seconds--and they came out with some horrid virus destroying their laptop.

Nictapolous hadn’t been pleased when he’d checked on their progress, and explicitly stated he was going to tell Mago about it. Miranda had shivered, images of torture, imprisonment, or death flooding her mind. They’d thrown themselves desperately back into their work, but there was a futileness about it, a resignation. Nothing they were doing was enough. They were never going to find what Mago desperately wanted. It was only a matter of time before the worst came.

So they were all pretty startled when the scanner suddenly opened.

A girl stepped out. She had a blonde bob and wore a red jacket and a black skirt. Her eyes were closed.

For a moment, their hub froze in sheer shock. Then they all scrambled to activity, people checking on the interference, shouting in disappointment that it was up again, running to the scanner,
running to the girl, running to call HQ. Running, running, running.

Miranda numbly rose from her computer. The girl looked only fifteen or so—about the age of her own son. She pushed the thought back. Now wasn’t the time for that.

“We’re saved,” she breathed.

“Thank God,” said Al Thatcher, one of her co-workers. He was a young man, barely out of college. Unusually emotional for someone from England, his brown eyes openly watered from sheer relief. “Let’s get her upstairs.”

They both stepped closer to the girl. Her eyes opened. They were blue, and...shining? Miranda squinted. Now that she looked closely, she could see there was something in her irises. Some strange symbol. Huh. Weird.

In unison, they took the girl’s arms. “We’re going to bring you to some soldiers upstairs, ok?” Al said. “They’re gonna take you to meet our boss. You’ll--”

“Al!” Miranda hissed. “Don’t talk to her!” The British man was new; he didn’t get that you weren’t supposed to show kindness or pity towards the Green Phoenix’s prisoners. No matter how young they were, or how much they made you think of your own family. It was too easy for a coworker who didn’t like you, or wanted your position, or just wanted more money, to claim your kindness indicated betrayal.

The Green Phoenix did not tolerate betrayal.

Looking properly chastised, Al snapped his mouth shut. Without further conversation, they dragged the girl across the room, holding her arms hard enough to bruise.

But the girl just smiled.

---

Jeremie didn’t know how long it took for him to reach the gate to the First City. His breath was coming in harsh pants and his limbs felt like they were on fire. And that was with his training with Jim! Without it, he was sure he would have fallen to the ground long before.

_Either Aelita was in really good shape when she was younger, or she had a vehicle that Hopper deleted._

He spent several moments hunched over, hands on his knees, trying to suck in air. His stupid hat was slipping over his eyes; he pushed it back.

“What’s the hold-up?” A harsh tenor rang in his ears, and he shuddered. _Mago! When did he get here?_

“Just catching my breath,” he answered, forcing himself to straighten up. Jeremie examined the gate. The doors were futuristic, and gothic-looking chains were anachronistically holding them shut. A lock hung in the middle. But stepping closer prompted no panel to appear.

“Over there, to your left!”
He looked in the direction Hera had indicated and jumped. On the bridge next to him, a small, transparent crystal cage had suddenly appeared. One side hung over the end of the bridge, above the abyss. Within it were three antique-looking keys. One was the color of gunmetal and had teeth that formed the shape of a gun’s barrel. Another was purple, with a head shaped like a musical note. The last was massive and made of solid gold, with precious stones encrusted on the head.

“Three keys…” Hera murmured.

“A riddle.”

He studied the bottom of the cage. It was divided into three sections, one for each key, and actually extended out of the cage. Touching it lightly, he found he could spin it like a wheel. An even lighter tug indicated it could be pulled out—but only towards him.

“The way this is set up…” he murmured. “You rotate one of the keys over the bridge, then pull out the bottom. The key you choose will fall onto the bridge, while the other two will fall into the abyss.” *And if you choose wrong, you’re locked out. Forever? I’m sure it’ll reset, but is there a system to record each avatar who tries, or--*

“Don’t even think of failing deliberately,” Mago warned.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” he muttered sarcastically. He eyed the keys again.

*A key symbolizing power...a key symbolizing wealth...or...*

Swiftly, he rotated the bottom until the third key was positioned over the bridge. He pulled it out, and his chosen key fell at his feet. The other two disappeared into the darkness.

“Stupid boy,” Mago spat. “You’re going to pay for that. It was obviously the golden key!”

“You’re not thinking like Hopper. He didn’t care about power or wealth. But his daughter, Aelita, she’s always loved music.”

Taking the key, he walked to the lock and stuck it in. It clicked neatly into place. With a metallic groan, the lock fell off. The chains, too, slid off the gates, rattling and clinking noisily. When they hit the bridge, they began to stream off its sides like an iron waterfall. The doors opened--

And a huge cloud of smoke zoomed past him.

---

As soon as he sensed the gate open, XANA immediately dove for it in a cloud of smoke. He blew past Belpois, not even bothering to hurt or laugh at the boy--or, well, he snickered at his ridiculous appearance, but he had no time to waste with taunts. Not when his goal was finally reached.

And the delicious irony was, Belpois made it possible. He hadn’t needed Eva after all.

His final act, before he left the First City, was to collapse the buildings near the gate, blocking the sole exit with rubble. Then, in a fraction of a second, he traversed the bridge leading to Lyoko, dove down the well, and re-entered Sector 5.

*Finally.*
Returning to Lyoko felt like sinking into bed.

XANA spread himself throughout all of Lyoko. He refilled the sectors with monsters and slipped inside the towers. In another fraction of a second, he was reconnected to the World Wide Network. He would have to search for appropriate places to reconstruct his Replikas, but for now...

It felt so good to be back. It had been like being blind, trapped in just one place, unable to monitor all he could.

Finally, XANA executed a diagnostic scan of the supercomputer. Yes, everything was well. Security? Firewalls at maximum efficiency. Connection to the First City? Perfect. Connection to the Mirror? Perfect. But...he could not reunite with the part of him that was in Hopper’s journal. Not yet. They could still communicate, but the one there had limited options for leaving.

There were only two avenues of escape for the him in the Mirror. The first, and unfortunately impossible at this moment, was to connect to this Lyoko through the Lyoko in the Mirror. The second, fortunately easier, was to possess Aelita, physically travel to the factory, and be virtualized.

He felt the XANA in the Mirror recoil furiously at the latter idea. Absolutely not.

Don’t be ridiculous. We’ve possessed her before--

I won’t do that to her again.

He’d abandoned his avatar--he had no physical form right now--but XANA sneered at his fragment. How weak he had become, letting some old attachment dictate what he did.

The other XANA seemed smug as he asked, And you were so eager to possess her back when we were in the outer world, weren’t you?

The reminder sparked irritation. Silence.

And imprisoning those kids instead of killing them, now that’s something I never thought we’d do. Face it: you’re as influenced by Aelita as I am.

It is weakness. We must cull it.

It was strange, XANA thought. As a multi-agent program, he was composed of millions of intelligent agents. They were very complex, but his ‘minds’ never really disagreed with each other. So to feel some of himself get angry, while the rest of himself didn’t...was strange. That didn’t work last time. It’s illogical to repeat mistakes. We need to try something new; we need to embrace our memories and emotions.

Of all the foolish… He stopped, realizing what the other XANA intended. Fine. Go ahead and see what it gets you. While you dither like some human teenager, I’ll actually be working to preserve our life and our goals.

He slammed the connection between them shut, fuming. If the XANA in the Mirror didn’t possess Aelita, he wouldn’t be able to leave. He would realize how stupid he was being shortly, but still, what a waste of time! And if he didn’t…

Then no matter. I’m back in power. I can function at almost peak efficiency without it.
Illias—just Illias, thank you—ordinarily loved his job. He’d been born to fight, born for a life of guns and smoke and explosions. Some of his earliest memories involved his old man taking him out hunting, teaching him how to fire a gun, taking care of a gun, wait for prey. Well, Illias had learned that humans were just another kind of prey, and patriotism was just another excuse people gave so they could kill each other. Working for the Green Phoenix provided a lot of the fun he liked.

Escorting some teenage girl through the sewers wasn’t what he considered fun.

Unless she tried to run. That could get fun.

He blew out his cheeks and exhaled. At least they were underground and not tramping through the forest. This country was too damn cold. All his socks did was provide something for the snow to get wet. And no matter how many layers he put on, he swore he was getting frostbite on his extremities and...other extremities.

He hung at the back of their little escort, providing rearguard. Guy and Myers were next to the girl, guns pointed at her, while Big—cleverly nicknamed for his 195 cm frame and muscles the size of cantaloupes--was point. It seemed a little much, but those techies were desperate to give Mago something, anything. And there had been those government agents sniffing around earlier. So maybe Illias would get lucky and there would be trouble after all.

The girl stopped, so suddenly Guy and Myers actually bumped into her.

...Wait, was she seriously gonna try to run? Sweet. Illias grinned and swung his beautiful Agram 2000 at her. “Move it, prisoner.”

She did. Just not in the direction he’d expected. She turned and started to walk away from them, back the way they’d come.

Illias was actually kind impressed at her balls.

He shoved her forcefully and aimed his gun at her leg. “Hey, if you don’t want to walk there, you don’t have to. We’ll just carry you.”

“Not that one, Illias,” Big called back, sounding bored. “Unless you want her to die of blood loss on the way there.”

“Fine,” he grumbled, switching the SMG for his pistol.

Then he fired.

It was a boringly easy shot. Went straight through her knee. There should have been blood splattering, the sound of her kneecap shattering, screams of pain.

But that wasn’t how it went through her. No, it literally went through her. Her form kinda fizzled a moment, then solidified, and she was fine and dandy.

The girl didn’t move. She didn’t make a sound. She just smiled. That strange symbol in her eyes gleamed.
For a few moments, bursts of gunfire echoed around the sewers, punctuated by the sound of bodies hitting solid surfaces. Each time one did, the sound of guns grew weaker, until finally, they came to an abrupt halt.

And then the sewers were silent again.

---

Aelita sat in her bedroom at the Hermitage, knees hugged to her chest, gaze drifting across the furniture and books and trinkets and things. This was where she’d always come to cry, in the real world. A place that had felt safe and comforting.

But now it was neither. All it did was remind her of the betrayal that had taken place downstairs.

She rubbed her red, puffy eyes.

XANA was sitting on the bed next to her. He hadn’t said anything as she’d cried or tried to comfort her. Just been there. Let her cry. And, when she was done, brought up a memory. Something trivial, a “hey, this one time, you…” story.

But when she had so few—because of her father’s betrayal—it meant something. So she’d listened, and when he was done he started another. And another.

How was it that he was more honest with her than her father had been?

Maybe…if he’s like this...

Mid-story, XANA suddenly trailed off. His gaze lifted to the ceiling. He became absolutely motionless, like when he’d been handling the Green Phoenix hackers. But this time, his silence extended for more than a few seconds.

She hesitated, then reached over to brush his fingers. “Is everything okay?”

Finally, movement! He lowered his head and met her eyes. Then he smiled, and a chill traveled up her spine. It wasn’t the warm, hopeful smile of her childhood friend. It was the cold, predatory smile he’d given Daddy as he plotted to betray him. “Yes. Everything’s more than okay, Aelita. Everything’s finally ready.”

Her mouth went dry. “What do you mean?”

“I’ve just completed a data transfer. Jeremie opened the gate in the First City, reconnecting it to Lyoko. The other part of me made it back there. I’m…he’s reconstructing his…our operational core. And that means things are going to change for us.”

“Change? How?”

He didn’t notice the quaver in her voice. Those dark eyes were ablaze with delight as he leaned forward, grasped her hands, smiled broadly. “With the power of Lyoko and the First City at our sides, nobody will be able to stop us. The men in black, the Green Phoenix, we can get rid of them both and rescue your mother. Anyone who dares to get in our way will be trampled under our feet—though I’ll let your friends live. They’ll be imprisoned, of course, but they won’t be possessed or
killed! We’ll make these two worlds whatever we want! We’ll rule together!”

Tears beaded at the corner of her eyes. She felt sick to her stomach. No...God, no...

She remembered him, and he’d accepted his memories of her, and it didn’t change anything. He still wanted to rule the world--only now, he wanted her by his side! As what, some kind of queen?

It didn’t matter. Her friends were imprisoned in that picture he painted. Imprisoned! And they were supposed to be the lucky one? Why did she fool herself into thinking, even for a few minutes, that maybe they could…

He seemed to realize something was wrong. He squeezed her hands. His smile softened, and her heart broke. That was the boy’s smile, not the monster’s. “What do you say, Aelita?”

Her throat worked. She drew up every ounce of courage she had. “I...I can’t.”

A heavy silence fell.

Finally, XANA chuckled, but it was a sad little sound. He dropped her hands. Instantly they felt cold. “I suppose it was illogical to hope all this--” He waved a hand. “--would make you stop hating me.”

“That’s not it. I don’t hate you, but--”

“Don’t lie!” he snapped. “That’s why you hesitated. You still hate me for everything I’ve done, and you can’t forgive me for it. Or am I wrong?”

Her throat clogged up. Say yes! Her mind screamed. Say you’ve forgiven him! Just say it, it doesn’t matter if it’s a lie! She couldn’t shake the feeling that if she didn’t, something terrible would happen.

But--even if she couldn’t forgive him--even if her thoughts and feelings were all tied up in a confusing knot--she knew she couldn’t do that. Friends shouldn’t lie to each other, and...God help her, she did consider him a friend. One who’d hurt her deeply, but one she still cared about. But she couldn’t let him kill her other friends, and she didn’t want to rule the world, and--

She’d hesitated too long. A brief expression of pain flashed on his face. “Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

He rose and stalked towards the door. Alarmed, Aelita called, “Where are you going?”

“I don’t know.” He said quietly. “If you won’t stand with me...it doesn’t matter. I won’t let the supercomputer be destroyed, not by Dido, not by your friends. I have the weapon of the First City in my hands, so I’m sure the Green Phoenix will be useful to me.”

That made her fall off the bed. “What?! XANA, no--”

He talked over her. “And if you hate me anyway, then I don’t really have anything else to lose, do I?”

“Stop! I don’t hate you! Let’s talk about this, please!”

Scrambling to her feet, she reached for his arm--

But all her fingers grasped were plumes of smoke.
He had no warning. One moment, Jeremie was staring after the cloud of smoke, horror coursing through him, the next his surroundings were disappearing.

A sensation like falling overwhelmed him. He stumbled against the metal wall of the scanner, dizzy with disorientation. The doors slid open. Arms roughly grabbed his and hauled him to his feet. Jeremie stumbled as he was dragged out of the scanner and shoved in front of a familiar figure: one wearing an orange three-piece suit.

“What,” Mago hissed, leaning in so closely Jeremie felt his breath slap his face, “was that?”

Still sluggish from the rematerialization and shocked by what he thought had just happened, all Jeremie could say was, “What?”

“That--that smoke. All those creatures suddenly appearing on Lyoko! Something came out of the First City and I want to know what!”

“That was XANA. The AI who used to--who does rule Lyoko.” He was back. He was really back this time. The enormity of what he’d inadvertently done finally started to sink in.

Had he wanted to crawl into a pit before? That wasn’t enough. He wanted to dig the pit himself and drown underneath the dirt. Why, why had he forgotten XANA was in the First City?! Why hadn’t he just--just what? Let Aelita’s mother die? He couldn’t do that.

Even if it meant bringing back XANA.

He was going to be sick.

Sweat beaded on Mago’s forehead. “Didn’t you kill him?”

“You know about that?”

“Hera’s been reading your diary, and Grigory spied on your conversation with those kids. I know the basics.” Mago pulled out a silk handkerchief and dabbed at his face. “That thing...it can really possess people?”

“Yes, and much more.” Jeremie shivered, remembering countless attacks. How long before XANA tried to kill him? But this time, there would be no Aelita to deactivate a tower.

Mago grabbed and shook him. Jeremie’s teeth clacked together. “Isn’t there anything you can do to stop him?!”

“No.”

They whirled. A tall, dark-haired boy was leaning against the wall, arms crossed. He was wearing all black, though his cape had been swapped out for a leather jacket with a fur collar. His shirt had, of course, his sigil stamped on it. His red irises shimmered, briefly glowing blue with Eyes before reverting.

“These kids could barely hold me at bay before, and that was when they were united,” he
continued. “Split up like they are, several of them my prisoners...no one has a chance against me.”

“Shoot him!” Mago shrieked at his soldiers, the last of his composure unraveling.

In this small chamber, the sound of about a dozen submachine guns opening fire was torturous. The scream of their bullets shredded Jeremie’s eardrums. Light flashed from their barrels, painfully white, strob ing like some party disco. He doubled over, pressing his hands against his ears and squeezing his eyes shut. It hurt so much he thought he must have been shot too.

When the gunfire cleared, Jeremie’s ears were ringing, the wall was riddled with bullet holes and XANA looked no worse for wear. He rolled his eyes. “Idiots. This is just a spectre.”

Mago’s face was red, his breathing heavy. He clenched his fists and glared, but he didn’t order his men to fire again. The soldiers traded uneasy glances now that they’d seen how ineffective their guns were.

*It’s all ineffective. It’s all hopeless. He’s going to possess them and make them shoot me--he’s going to electrocute me to death--he’s going to force me onto Lyoko and into the Digital Sea--*

So caught in his panic was he, that Jeremie didn’t realize XANA was speaking at first. Not until he heard his name. “…just had to come here in person to thank you, Belpois, for helping me regain all my power.”

He hunched his shoulders, trying to make himself invisible. Misery permeated from his being. XANA shot him a smirk, then turned away. “Now...Hannibal Mago. Let’s talk.”

“Talk?” Mago said through gritted teeth.

A thought nagged at him. A question. And even in his state of blank misery, Jeremie’s brain jumped on it, trying to solve and use it. *Something’s not right.* This wasn’t how the XANA he knew acted. Perking up a little, he shook his head. “What are you doing, XANA? You’re never this chatty. And you’ve never been the type to taunt, not even me.”

“True. Maybe today’s an exception. Or maybe I just needed to buy a little more time to seize control of the Green Phoenix’s assets.”

Mago swore--not just in French, but in several other languages too. He scrambled, patting his pockets, until he fumbled out a phone. Mago stabbed at the buttons, stared, seemed unhappy with whatever had or hadn’t happened. He threw the phone to the ground and swore again. “You son of a--give me back my company!”

“You think you can call the shots? Funny. Let me explain this to you, Mago.” XANA’s eyes narrowed. “Ordinarily I’d just possess you. But luckily for you, the supercomputer only has so much quantum computing power for me to draw off. I consider preventing Dido’s agents from flying in higher on my priority list.”

Or maybe...XANA can’t possess that many people? How many had they ever seen XANA possess at a time? A class, maybe two? Still a frightening number--but not enough for him to seize control of the entire Green Phoenix. It was a worldwide organization, and XANA had never shown himself capable of affecting places that far away with just the supercomputer; he’d needed his Replikas.

*Why bother with that indeed, when he can just hack into all its assets and control them that way?*

“Now, here’s what going to happen. I will stop Dido and these kids from shutting off the supercomputer. I will also use your resources as I want. You’re going to let me, because this way
you get to keep your position at least in name. If you try to stop me, I’ll kill you. Understood?”

Mago’s face was red, his knuckles white, his entire body trembling. The soldiers looked befuddled, peering between him and XANA as if they weren’t sure who was really giving the orders. “Understood,” Mago ground out.

“Good. Oh, and one last thing--lock Belpois up in some dark cell with no technology. I don’t want him getting any ideas about trying to create another anti-me program.”

The spectre disappeared, but the chill he left behind did not.

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When the agents arrived, it was starting to snow, and Richard was helping set up rope guides along the pathways of Kadic. They were meant to be used in blizzards--if, in some horrible circumstances, you found yourself outside, you were supposed to hold onto the ropes as you walked so you wouldn’t get lost--or walk into a street. Setting them up in such a light, if sudden, snowfall had seemed overly cautious to some.

“This XANA surely can’t control the weather, can he?” Jim had laughed when Odd suggested the idea. But upon seeing Odd’s serious face, he’d fallen silent, studied the boy, then muttered that he’d start ushering students inside.

Richard, personally, was inclined to trust the teens’ expertise. He didn’t know anything about virtual realities or wars or programming. He was just a guy useful because of what was on his palm-computer.

At the sound of tires, Richard looked up and squinted through the veil of white. He was near the gates of Kadic, and several black vans had just pulled up. As he watched, men and women in suits started piling out and unloading duffel bags, crates, and various weaponry. If they were cold, they didn’t show it.

“Hey!” He yelled, waving an arm. “Over here!”

One turned and, lightly touching the rope, made his way towards Richard. He was an Asian-looking fellow with a ponytail. He scanned Richard’s face a moment, as if comparing it to an internal database, then said, “What’s the best way to the train station?”

He scrambled to remember the passcode Dido had made them all memorize. “You could walk, but it’s about ten blocks.”

The agent nodded curtly, and he figured that was correct. “Is this all?” Richard asked, looking over the group of twenty or so.

“We’re all she could spare from Brussels. Dido was going to try to fly more in, but if this weather keeps up...I don’t think that’s going to happen.”

Richard frowned. “Alright. Let me guide you guys to Professor...er, Major Her...er, Major Steinback.”

By the time he’d done so and helped the agents unload, about thirty minutes had passed and the
snowfall had turned into a snowstorm. Richard had grabbed a pair of snow goggles and another jacket from the ones Jim was handing out and returned to his work. The campus of Kadic was almost completely empty, and he was almost done…

As he tied the last knot, a distant shape caught his attention. A hunched over form, struggling to make headway against the wind. A student!

He rushed over, heart doubling in alarm as the student sank to the ground. “Hold on!” he shouted.

Only as he reached her did he realize he’d let go of the rope, and his footprints were rapidly filling in. How was he supposed to get back?

As he pondered this, he knelt to pick up the student—a girl—

And she came to life and pounced on him.

His shout was lost to the wind as he fell back, arms windmilling. “Oof!” The snow carpeted his fall, but the air still rushed out of his lungs.

Before he could move, the girl pinned him down. Her short blonde hair was whipping in the wind, her blue eyes almost glowing. Recognition dawned. Eva! No--XANA!

Richard struggled, but he hardly worked out and Eva was surprisingly strong. One hand almost lazily pushed him back down, while the other shoved inside his pockets, searching—for what?

White teeth gleamed in a triumphant smile, and just as suddenly, the pressure was off his chest and she was gone.

For a moment, he lay there, blinking snow out of his eyes. What just happened?

Grimacing, Richard stood up and looked around helplessly. He’d lost all sense of direction when he’d fallen, and had no idea where anything was. He took a tentative step forward, stopped, turned and turned in a circle, desperate to gain his bearings. White. White. Nothing but white. Lightning-like crackles of fear streaked up his spine.

I’m going to die. I’m going to get lost and die out here. Sweat pooled under his arms and slid down his face. What would his parents think? Why did he even come out here, he was useless--

Crunch, crunch, crunchcrunchcrunch-- someone or something was rushing towards him. Salvation! “Over here!” He yelled, cupping his hands.

Splashes of color appeared, growing steadily closer. Red and black--and then, blonde and blue.

Oh, what now? He thought despairingly, and then a fist connected with his jaw and knocked him out.

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Through Eva, XANA watched the Lyoko Warriors swarm Richard’s unconscious body, yelling in alarm. A frown pulled at the girl’s lips as he directed her to turn and disappear back into the blizzard.
Why had he brought him back?

XANA hadn’t cared enough to kill the man. He was harmless. Besides, left in the decreasing temperatures, growing buried under a pile of snow, Richard Dupuis would likely perish on his own.

And at that thought, something had slowed Eva’s footsteps.

Guilt? Certainly not. He didn’t care about Richard Dupuis. As long as XANA triumphed in the end, the fate of that man meant nothing to him.

But it would mean something to Aelita.

As soon as that thought entered his head, it wouldn’t leave. No matter how much he raged, envisioned future goals, recited the most complicated math problems—all he could think about was how sad she’d be when she learned her friend was dead. Until, with a furious snarl, he’d spun Eva around to drag the imbecile to safety.

*Fine. Fine! I’ll keep them alive. Only so they can despair when they witness my victory.*

It had nothing to do with Aelita. Nothing at all. She’d already spurned his Mirror-trapped self; what was there to gain by holding to that stupid promise the other XANA had made?

To calm himself, he looked at the palm-computer he’d stolen. The dossier was already tucked into Eva’s jacket, and only he had recognized the codes hidden in Hopper’s message, even if he hadn’t decoded them yet. With this, Code Down was out of the Lyoko Warriors’ reach. They would never destroy Lyoko; Dido’s reinforcements would never arrive; his Replikas would be rebuilt; and he would use the Green Phoenix’s resources to assist his takeover. He’d watch Mago, of course, XANA didn’t trust him as far as he could throw him, but this was the best position XANA had been in since his creation.

The other him stirred. He was throbbing with furious hurt—and wistfully thinking back to those days with Aelita.

*Days of ignorance,* XANA spat at his other self.

Humans like Hopper, they clung to notions of morality to maintain their preconceptions of themselves. As soon as push came to shove, they shed their skins and bared their fangs, proving themselves to be just as monstrous as they claimed he was.

Well, he was a monster. But so what? It was be in control or be controlled—and he would never be controlled again.

There could be no peaceful coexistence with humans for him. Not when his own creator had feared him. Not when Aelita hated him. And not when he hated humanity.

This was the only path left for him. He had no choice but to keep walking down it.

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**ACT III END**
A/N: So with Act III done, I’m gonna be taking a hiatus of a month or two, because...well, Fire Emblem Three Houses is coming out tomorrow, and playing that is gonna leave me no time to write. Is this a mean cliffhanger? Yeah, but...well, I’m an author. I have to get my evil kicks somewhere. Thank y’all for your support, and I’ll be back in August/September!
Act IV Chapter I: Where We Stand

Chapter Notes

A/N: Sooooo yeah, this is not September. This is not even close to being September. I'm, uh, sorry about that. Life just got very busy. I won't be able to update on a strict schedule anymore--but I will keep updating!

Those familiar with the novels may notice this "act" has a different title than the fourth book. That's because, while the first three acts hit basically the same plot beats as the first three novels, we're going completely off the rails now.

I'd like to give a special shout-out to Antex-the-Legendary-Zoroark over on ff.net, who dumped a review for every chapter practically overnight, and waking up to that gave me the last little push I needed to get this done.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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ACT IV: The Shadow War

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Aelita was on the verge of panic.

At first, she’d searched for XANA, hoping to clear up that whole awful argument. She’d scoured the Mirror again and again, but it was a hopeless mission; there were too many days and times, an entire city and infinite places to hide.

Then she’d tried searching for a way out. The remote didn’t have a button that would rematerialize her. Reaching the end of the Mirror didn’t do anything. She’d sat still for what felt like hours, hoping that maybe the Mirror would log that as inactivity and eject her.

No go.

Now it was…day three? Day four? She wasn’t sure. She knew she’d gone to sleep twice, but she had no idea how long she’d slept or if her mental calendar corresponded to the real one. All she knew was that the date here was June 5th, 1994, a beautiful sunny day. She’d jumped back to its morning, and was wandering through Kadic’s park; a light breeze drifted between the trees, bringing the soft scent of early summer. The sun was on her face and the air was warm.

The whole scene was serene, picturesque even…but maggots of anxiety and fear were writhing in Aelita’s gut, barely-contained.
I am not trapped here. I am not trapped here. There is a way out. I just have to find it.

But where? Where was it? “Daddy?” she called for the upteenth time, voice quivering. “Daddy, can you help me?” She’d thought he must have left something for her—some trigger, some program—that would respond to her voice and give her a key out.

Nothing happened. Same as before. But—but that had to be it. That had to--

She jumped as a passing student walked through her. Not seeing her. Not acknowledging her. Not caring about her.

She was a ghost. A ghost in the machine.

No, no, no, I’m not a ghost. I’m not trapped. I’m not.

Aelita rubbed her arms. Despite the warmth, under the spandex of her outfit, she could feel goosebumps against her fingers.

How long had she been doing this, though? Trying the same thing over and over and hoping for different results was the very definition of insanity.

Maybe...maybe Daddy had to be in front of her. Maybe it was like that hologram her friends had said was in the First City. Maybe if he was physically in front of her, that’d trigger whatever he’d left for her.

Yes, that made sense! It was early; he was probably still at the Hermitage with past-Aelita. She started walking there. Then, subconsciously, she started picking up speed, going from a walk to a power walk, and then a jog, and then she just activated her wings. I need to get out of here. I can’t be trapped again!

The forest flew by in a blur. Branches and tree trunks whipped at her face—if she had been anywhere other than here, her reckless flying would have knocked her to the ground more than once. But it was worth it. She was travelling faster than she could on foot. The house came into view, and—there! There he was! She could see him in the entrance hall through the window! She landed, deactivated her wings, and sprinted up the porch.

“Daddy!” she yelled, yanking the front door open. “Daddy, please, help me!”

He kept walking.

Aelita stopped at the threshold like she’d run into a wall.

He did not see her. Did not hear her. Did not...

Did not.

The carefully-constructed dam she’d built to hold back her panic shattered. Her breath began coming in fast and shallow. No, no, no, no, no...

She’d searched and couldn’t find a way out.

She was trapped in a virtual world.

Alone.

Again.
“No!” she cried out. “No, please--don’t leave me here alone! Daddy! Daddy, help me!” He had to have left something for her, he had to, where was it, why was nothing happening?!

Oh God, how much time had passed out there? Had it been hours, days, months, years?

Did anyone know she was still here?

Aelita broke. She shouted until her voice was hoarse, cycling through all her friends’ names in quick succession. Then she shouted for Richard, Professor Hertz, even XANA. Begging someone to answer, to show her she wasn’t alone --

No one did.

Weeping, Aelita sank onto the front porch, fingers digging into her head and yanking on her hair.

_I can’t do this again. I can’t be in stasis for years again. I can’t, I can’t, I can’t --_

The wind suddenly intensified. Aelita cried out and shielded her eyes as it whipped about faster and faster. Dust and smoke congealed, turning the whirlwind into a dark mass. Through her eyelashes, she could see it solidifying, taking form. And suddenly, the wind died.

Where the whirlwind once was, XANA stood in that all-black knight’s outfit. The Eye on his chest seemed to glow menacingly. His dark hair was slightly ruffled from the wind and his lips were drawn in a discontented scowl. He looked nothing like her friend and every bit the villain. “You can’t give me a moments’ peace, can you?” he growled. “No, you have to start crying so loudly, I can hear you all throughout the Mirror.”

Hearing a voice address her, seeing eyes that were glaring at her and not through her, having proof there was another, real person here… At that moment Aelita didn’t care about all the bad blood between them, just that she wasn’t alone. Just that someone could help her escape.

“XANA, please,” she begged, uncaring about pride. “Please let me out. I can’t be trapped again, _please_.

He gave a short, curt shake of his head. “Neither of me wants you dead, but we can’t let you stop us.”

“You think leaving me alive and alone in a virtual world forever is a mercy? It isn’t! You know that, you fought against it!”

His voice softened just the tiniest bit. “I know. Believe me, I know.”

“Then _let me out_!” Her voice cracked. “You can’t want to be here, personally playing jailer, forever!”

His face twisted in displeasure--just for a moment, but Aelita saw it all the same. _I knew it_. She knew he wouldn’t want to be here any more than...

Wait. Why was he still here? XANA could have brought her to Lyoko and imprisoned her in a Guardian, or possessed her if he was really that concerned about her potential to stop him. The confusion and curiosity temporarily overshadowed everything else she was feeling, and she embraced them.

“Why are you still here?” she said out loud. “Shouldn’t the other XANA have come for you by now?”
He didn’t respond.

Aelita frowned. Did it really matter why he was still here? Probably not. But still, solving this mystery was better than dwelling on her situation. “Is there something else you need to find in the Mirror?”

“Think whatever you want.”

“No, I don’t think so. You said you were fully integrated into the system, right? You would have found everything by now.” Her mind spun, cycling through possibilities and ideas. “Did he leave you here to...keep me company? No, you’re him and he’s you--you’d hate being stuck somewhere.”

He tensed almost imperceptibly. “Do you really expect me to answer? Stop wasting your time.”

Wait, wait, wait--she was on the right track. He always got snippy when he felt pressured. What was it? ‘Leave you’? ‘Company’? ‘You’re him’? ‘Stuck’?

Stuck. She turned the word over in her mind. How could XANA be stuck here? He could travel through networks...except this was an isolated network. Still, with Lyoko under his control, he could surely work something out, unless...

The lightbulb went off over her head. “He’s abandoned you, hasn’t he?”

The tight line of XANA’s mouth grew even tighter, an angry slash. Confirmation.

“He has. But...why?”

He still didn’t answer, damn him, and Aelita felt her temper flare at his stubbornness. “Dammit, XANA! If he has, then that means we’re both trapped here and we both want out. We could work together--”

“Oh really?” He snapped. “You made your stance on the idea of working with me perfectly clear.”

Was he really going to do this? “There is a big difference between escaping a situation we both hate and taking over the world! You asked me to turn my back on everybody and everything I believe in--how did you expect me to respond?!”

“I expected you to realize the cause you and your friends fought for is built on Franz Hopper’s lies. I expected you to realize I have a right to exist, but the world doesn’t want me to!”

“Daddy is not representative of the whole world!”

“And how about when the only person I thought loved me hates me? If even you--”

“Would you just listen?! How many times have my friends and I argued or disagreed? How many times have you exploited that? Does that mean I hate them? No! And I don’t hate you, even after everything!”

At some point, they’d both started screaming. Aelita’s throat felt sore, raw. Her hands were clenched into fists and her chest was heaving for air. And--when had she started crying again?

She rubbed her eyes, suddenly feeling very tired. XANA fell silent for a moment, expression inscrutable. When he did speak, it was in a normal volume, but the words were sharp, jagged, bitten off. “But you said you can’t forgive me.”
“Just because I can’t now doesn’t mean I may not be able to someday. Feelings aren’t always simple, XANA. I...” Her breath hitched. “You killed my father. But you’re still my childhood friend. I’m trying to reconcile those two facts, and that’s not easy.”

More silence.

“Please. Please just work with me here. Please show me that reconciliation isn’t a stupid hope.”

The silence continued to drag on. Aelita closed her eyes, almost overwhelmed by hopelessness. Who was she kidding? Things were far too different now. There was no point in--

“Fine. Yes, you’re right. My other half decided to cut me off.”

The relief that flooded her made Aelita actually gasp. Thank God. There’s a chance. “Why?”

XANA shook his head. “...It doesn’t matter. What matters is I’m a prisoner here, same as you.”

“But there has to be a way out, somehow.” She couldn’t, couldn’t just accept that after everything, after the pain and struggles and heartbreak...this was her fate. “You’re controlling the interference, right? Can’t you drop that? If you rematerialize me, I could go get help from Kadic.”

“Assuming I believe you’d actually come back, you’d just be captured by the Green Phoenix. We’d still both be prisoners, just in separate places.”

Oh, right. She’d forgotten the Green Phoenix was outside. Okay, what other options were there? “Could we use the Lyoko here to connect to--”

“We need three people for that to work. One to turn on the supercomputer, one to operate the supercomputer, and one to be in the scanners. They all need to be triggered at the same time. The system recognizes me as one entity, so I can’t split up and do that.”

She could feel desperation rising, growing into a great swell of a wave. “What about--how did you possess Eva in the first place? Could you do that again?”

“I used static electricity to directly jump from the computer she was using into her body, instead of sending a spectre through a tower. And no, that’s not feasible here. It left me weakened for several hours, and I guarantee the other XANA is keeping an eye out for it. If I jump out of here, he’ll kill whatever body I possess and I’ll die with it.”

Frustrated, Aelita stamped her foot. “You could try to help me brainstorm, you know!”

“Aelita, I have analyzed this situation long before you have, with more computing power behind me. There’s nothing you can come up with that I haven’t thought of and dismissed already.”

What...what was he saying? She stared at him. “He actually is. He actually is. “But...but you never give up.” Not even in the war. No matter how many times they’d stopped him, no matter how often he’d had defeat snatched from the jaws of victory, he’d always tried again. He’d been relentless. Determined. He didn’t just give up.

“I’ve never been this tired before, Aelita.” He sounded so...vulnerable. “I drove myself insane. I spent years fighting. I damaged our relationship possibly beyond repair. And after all of that, I just
ended up right back where I started: imprisoned inside a computer for eternity.”

Aelita took a breath, tried to think of something to say--

“But the worst part? I did it to myself, literally and metaphorically.”

She closed her mouth. Pulled her knees up and rested her head on her arms. What was there to say? He’d done so many terrible things, she’d fought to protect the world, and in the end...

In the end, they were in the same place.

In the end, it didn’t matter.

---

It felt like a dream.

Well, not really. Sissi’s dreams were either nice and involved kisses with Ulrich, or horrible nightmares of, apparently, forgotten trauma. This was neither, but it had the same surreal feel to it. A kind of bubble-thin layer seemed to exist between her and the rest of the world; nothing felt real, and she was drifting aimlessly.

When the first of Dido’s agents arrived--about twenty or so, from Brussels of all places--it caused a stir among the student body. First school was cancelled, then the blizzard came out of nowhere, then this? What gossip to be had! What could it be? Conspiracy theories ran amok, despite the teachers’ best efforts to curb them.

But then the blizzard didn’t stop, and people’s concerns shifted elsewhere.

The blizzard was the worst one this winter: wind howling, hail the size of golf balls flying sideways, the ground buried under several feet of snow. Warm clothes and extra blankets were handed out among the students. The boiler room, thermostats, and spare generators were closely monitored. Going outside was forbidden to anyone but the adults.

There was some good news. Although the temperature outside was below freezing, indoors it wasn’t so bad. It was cold, but nobody was in danger of hypothermia or anything.

“Last time, it got to like...below forty? Even inside. And it was still dropping when I stopped paying attention,” Odd had recounted grimly. He hadn’t been thrilled by William’s decision to tell her about Lyoko, but he’d understood why. “That was one of XANA’s nastier attacks.”

“What’s different this time?” Sissi had asked. “I mean, he’s even more powerful now, right?”

“This time, I think he’s just trying to trap us inside, not kill us. Dunno why though.”

And fortunately, the truck that dropped off food for the cafeteria had arrived before the blizzard, so no one was hungry...but that wouldn’t last more than a week. Eventually someone would have to brave the weather to get more supplies.

So the situation wasn’t as bad as it could have been, but still bad enough that Sissi was acutely aware of her uselessness. She couldn’t fight like William or Odd, she wasn’t a tech head like Mr. Ishiyama or Mr. Belpois, and she wasn’t military like Professor Hertz-- Professor Hertz, of all
people!--or the agents. Even Jim had to be more useful than her. At least he was able to organize the student body, mark off supplies on a checklist, help set the perimeter, and keep the students’ spirits up.

It was the start of the third day of the blizzard, and those ‘in’ were meeting in the boiler room. Richard was the only one not there, as he was still recovering from being attacked by XANA.

“We’re still not getting any signal,” Professor Hertz was reporting another futile attempt to contact Dido. “And this storm is too dangerous for planes to fly or cars to travel. Dido won’t be able to send any more agents. The people here are all we have to fight XANA.”

“And the Green Phoenix,” Mr. Ishiyama added, wringing his hands. Mrs. Ishiyama had returned home the morning of the blizzard to bring Hiroki to a relative’s. No one had heard from her since. Most likely she was safe at her house with her son, but there was always that little knife of fear, slipping itself between ones’ ribs. Between that and his daughter being MIA, Sissi was surprised the man was holding himself together at all.

Of the other fathers in the room, Mr. Belpois looked like a ghost, Daddy kept glancing at her as if afraid just knowing all this would make her disappear, and Mr. Stern--oooh, Sissi was fuming over his nonchalance. How could he not love or worry about Ulrich? He was his father for crying out loud!

“We don’t have a chance of taking the factory with these resources.” said the Chinese agent who was leading the mission, code-named Fox.

“What about the Hermitage?” William asked, drumming his fingers against his thigh. He had been sleeping like the dead for the past couple of days, waking only when the adults needed his help. Now he looked a lot better. “If we rescue Ulrich, Yumi, and Aelita, we’ll have a way better shot at stopping them.”

“Especially Aelita,” Odd said. “She can deactivate whatever tower XANA’s using to keep this blizzard up.”

“We might be able to take the Hermitage,” Hertz allowed. She glanced at the sewer entrance, which they had barricaded. “If we unblock this, we could get there through the sewers. Mago has an army, but from what you said, Odd, I think he’s only got a small company stationed there, so we might be able to overpower them. But the question is whether we could hold the Hermitage.”

“He can bring in reinforcements from the factory,” Fox said, “We can barricade the Hermitage’s sewer entrance, and the blizzard will stall their arrival, but we probably won’t be able to hold it.”

“We don’t need to though, right?” William asked, leaning forward and bracing his arms on his knees. “We just need to stay there long enough to dismantle the scanners. How long would that take?”

They glanced at Mr. Belpois. “A few hours,” he said, voice hoarse.

“Okay, but what about XANA?” Sissi asked. She was still trying to wrap her head around all this--Aelita’s past, terrorists, this whole Lyoko thing--but that seemed like a big thing to overlook, right? “Maybe this weather will stall this Mago guy for a few hours, but XANA doesn’t have that restriction, right?”

Fox turned to Odd. “You said EMPs are effective against its spectres, right?”

“Yes,” Odd nodded. “It only stuns them for a little bit, though. I think that’s why we only used the
one, Jeremie decided that building them took more time and resources than it was worth.”

Fox frowned. “Well, hopefully ours will be more effective. Dido warned us in advance we might be fighting an artificial intelligence, so we packed any equipment we thought might be useful against it.”

They were going to hope they could delay XANA for a few hours? Sissi felt less and less confident about their odds by the minute.

“Uh, won’t these EMP thingies short out the scanners or computer?” Jim asked, scratching his head.

“No,” Professor Hertz said, shaking her head. “Waldo designed these custom faraday cage casings for all his equipment, just in case. Took a hefty chunk out of our budget, too…”

“Just in case?” Sissi echoed. “How paranoid was this guy?”

Everyone exchanged glances.

“Enough to stay ahead of all our agents.”

“From what I gather, very.”

“He was a bit eccentric, as a teacher.”

“He drove himself insane from paranoia.”

For a moment, Sissi was stunned into silence. “Well then,” she said, for lack of other words. “That’s reassuring.”

William chuckled, and the sound created some nervous flutter in Sissi’s stomach. Weird.

“Alright, enough idle chatter,” Fox said, glancing at his wristwatch. “We still have time to work on a plan of infiltration and assault, then we’ll break for lunch. Let’s hear ideas, people.”

---

Words could not describe the type of fury Hannibal felt, being able to watch all his company’s business going on, but not being able to control it.

Like everything important, the Green Phoenix had all started with money. He’d realized fast that military life wasn’t cushy enough for him, but a man of his background had few options for improving education and fewer still for obtaining legitimate jobs. Good thing Hannibal had never cared about legitimacy.

Whenever he could, he would take his scarce paycheck to the most respectable gambling dens—not any, oh no, Hannibal Mago would not settle for any—and turn it into a beautiful figure fat with zeroes. He’d had a skill, even then, for knowing how to spot weaknesses in a pre-existing system. A head for math and business. The ability to recognize opportunity when he saw it and reach out and take it with both hands. He lost, of course, no gambler always won—but not more than he profited.
But the most valuable things he’d gained from those dens were connections and secrets. And the ones he’d found, forged, or stolen, had helped lay the foundations for the birth of the Green Phoenix. Hannibal had realized quickly that more profit was to be made from his military secrets, but those gambling dens had laid the foundations for him to take his first steps into the underworld. He had built a kingdom there, lovingly carved from blood and metal, and carefully cared for over the years.

And now, before his eyes, it was turning into dust.

That thing clearly had no idea the amount of work necessary to maintain such a large syndicate. Oh, it was trying to maintain the facade that Hannibal was still in charge--but in such a poor manner! The only work it had really done was screwing around with the Green Phoenix’s supercomputers, which Hannibal had obtained as part of several futile projects to recreate Hopper’s work. It hadn’t struck any new deals, wasn’t keeping an eye on the underworld, wasn’t paying close attention to worldwide operations that didn’t interest it.

If it wasn’t stopped soon, the Green Phoenix would lose too much standing in the criminal underworld to continue to feed his lavish lifestyle!

“Hera!” he snapped, throwing open the flap to her tent. He felt his irritation and rage surge anew as the flap listlessly drooped shut behind him--there was something innately less satisfying in that than in the motion of slamming a door.

Hera’s tent was spartan, even for a military operation. There was a cot, a metal desk with a computer, and a trunk with basic necessities. She despised messiness (a trait Hannibal quite liked about her), and so there was no trace of dust or clutter anywhere. She was sitting at the desk, humming softly and working on her laptop.

At his entrance, the humming stopped instantly. Hera looked up from her computer, expression twisted in nervousness for just a moment before it was smoothed over. With cool professionalism, she said, “Yes, sir?”

He held up his phone, which displayed an email from a reliable source about the American military in Afghanistan on its screen. “Give me good news. Tell me that thing has been paying attention to the situation in Kandahar.”

“I’m afraid not, sir.”

“Dammit, we need to have all signs we were there erased yesterday!” Now the blasted American military was going to raid the factory there and find the weapons they’d been producing, and records of who they’d sold them to, and soon he was going to have half a dozen ‘legitimate’ businessmen banging down his door in a rage because their dirty laundry was aired because that fucking AI couldn’t be bothered--

Hannibal had always considered himself a civilized man. He kept a reign on his temper, only letting it out at carefully-selected moments to cultivate the best amount of fear and respect. But ever since that AI took over and destroyed all his plans, he’d felt himself unravel thread by thread. Now, he needed an outlet for it all, or else he would lose it.

He stalked towards Hera, who shriveled at the look in his eye. She knew what it meant by now.

Hannibal raised his fist--

Pain exploded along his wrist.
It happened so suddenly, it didn’t even register at first. One moment, his fist was rising for a swing. The next, it was jerked to a halt by fingers curling around his wrist hard enough to bruise. Slim, pale, feminine—he almost thought it was Hera, except she had never fought back before and he could see both her hands right now, half-raised defensively to protect her face.

He looked over to see the offender. The person who had so casually interfered was a teenage girl with blonde hair and glowing blue eyes. There were certainly no teenage girls in his camp, and there was only one entity that could have gotten past all his guards unhindered. “XANA,” he spat.

“Correct.” The voice was chilling enough to match the blizzard outside. “It seems I arrived just in time. I was on my way to speak to you about this very matter.”

The thing glanced at Hera, who was trembling slightly. “Don’t worry, I won’t let him hurt you again. You can leave, if you want.”

“You certainly may not!” Hannibal countermanded. “And you--you may have usurped the Green Phoenix, but how I treat my subordinates is my business!”

“Wrong. They’re my subordinates now.” The blue eyes darkened. “And I believe your treatment of her specifically would qualify as ‘abuse’ in human courts.”

“What would you know about--”

“Shut up.”

The pressure on his wrist increased exponentially. Something popped. Stars exploded in front of his vision. Hannibal swore. “I wasn’t certain, at first,” the thing said. “Human relationships are complicated, and there was a lot of information in the Green Phoenix data banks. But now I’ve searched through it all. I found your personal journals. I know everything about what you’ve done to her.”

Everything…? Suddenly nervous, Hannibal glanced at Hera, trying to gauge her reaction. Her brow was furrowed in confusion, and--was that a hint of curiosity in her eyes?

He couldn’t let this thing keep stoking that fire. “Get out of here!” he snapped at her. She gasped and started, hands flying to her chest. Years of conditioning had her running out of the room before the last syllable was even fully out of his mouth.

The thing watched her go, mouth a tight line, fury sparking in those glowing eyes. It turned back to Hannibal once Hera was out of the tent. “Know this: I leave you alive because it benefits me, that these humans don’t know who holds the real power here. However…”

XANA leaned in, voice low and metallic. “If you lay a hand on her again, I won’t be merciful enough to kill you. Instead, I will stick you in Lyoko and let you spend the rest of your life as an insane, babbling mess.”

The painful grip on his wrist finally disappeared, and Hannibal stomped on the urge to rub it. The thing stared at him with cold, dead eyes, unblinking, unmoving, until he had no choice but to look away. Only then did it leave, disappearing in the time it took to blink.

His crime syndicate was being run into the ground. His wrist was bruised and possibly broken. His pride was stinging. His favorite method of stress relief had been taken away. And Hannibal Mago had never hated anyone or anything as much as he did that fucking artificial intelligence.

Seething silently, he went off to find Grigory and his personal doctor, comforting himself with the
thought that revenge was best served cold.
And his revenge would be forthcoming soon.

---

The sound of the door opening jerked Jeremie out of his work. He looked up, blinking, to see Nictapolous’s silhouette filling the door frame. Jeremie could hear soft panting and knew those two dogs were behind him. One hand held a spoon and a bowl of substance that, Jeremie knew, could most accurately be described as gruel.

“Lunchtime, runt,” Nictapolous said, slamming the ‘meal’ on the floor. “How’s our little project coming along?”

Jeremie looked back at his laptop. When he’d been thrown in this tiny little janitor’s closet, he’d thought that was the end. But in less than an hour, Nictapolous had shoved in a bag containing a thin blanket--and Jeremie’s own laptop, which had been taken alongside him.

Hannibal Mago, as it turned out, was not content to follow XANA’s orders. And thankfully, XANA’s attention to detail had never been his strong suit--especially when he was working off theoretics. He’d never taken control of a global-wide crime syndicate before, and having to manage it all surely meant some things were escaping his notice.

All of this meant the Green Phoenix was ‘employing’ Jeremie to solve their little problem. Which sounded good on the surface.

Unfortunately, Mago still saw fit to treat him as his prisoner.

“Thanks,” he said sarcastically, sliding the bowl closer. He nudged the laptop to the side and took the first disgusting bite of food, careful not to drip anything on the precious electronics.

“That thing done yet?” Nictapolous asked, nodding at the laptop.

Jeremie scowled. “You’re asking me to, in the span of a few days, make a better anti-XANA virus, that can be delivered without needing to be uploaded into Sector 5, and that won’t need--” *Franz Hopper’s death* “--more energy than the supercomputer can provide. All without an internet connection. I’m not a miracle worker.” *Idiots.*

‘A better anti-XANA virus’ was a misnomer, but he wasn’t really sure what else to call it. The Green Phoenix’s suggestion had actually been that he materialize XANA; “We’ll see if it can ignore bullets then.” Nictapolous had parrotted for Mago. It was an interesting idea to be sure, one Jeremie had never really considered before. Given how XANA could divide himself, such a thing would need to be injected directly into his core codes to stick--and he’d never been able to find those.

But that was what the anti-XANA program had been designed around--to hunt down his core codes through the Internet and inject itself into his very ‘heart’, so to speak. So with a little modification, it should be possible.

Of course, making those modifications felt like he was hitting his head against a wall. And it didn’t help that there was just something...skeevy about this plan, in Jeremie’s opinion. A materialized
XANA would probably appear around Yumi or William’s age. Planning to kill someone who was physically a teenager was...well, a little more troubling than the thought of just destroying a computer program.

But it *would* be more absolute--he still had no idea how XANA had survived the first time. He couldn’t risk that happening again. Not with so many lives at stake.

*He’s not a person,* he told himself. *He still won’t be even if we materialize him. You’re not...an accessory to murder.*

It didn’t make him feel any better.

*Remember everything he’s done. Imagine what he could be doing right now, to Aelita and your friends and all the people of the world.*

There. That did it.

“Yeah, Mago says to stop worrying about working around the uploading thing. We’ll be able to deliver it through Lyoko.”

“How? I’m not a fighter,” Jeremie said. Just the *thought* made him break out in a sweat. “If you put me on Lyoko, XANA’s monsters will--”

“Not talking about you, runt. Your two friends are perfectly healthy and available.”

*Two friends? He means Ulrich and Yumi!*  

Locked up in this makeshift cell, with no Internet, Jeremie had no news of what was going on with his friends, the Green Phoenix, or Paris itself. Nictapolous was his only ‘visitor’--not even Hera had been by. He was blind and deaf. This was the first time he’d heard *anything* about anyone.

Both eagerness and fear flooded him at Nictapolous’s words. This was his chance to find out how Ulrich and Yumi were doing! But...if the Green Phoenix had their sights set on them… He gingerly touched his bruised, swollen cheek. “Are they still in the First City? Are they okay?”

“For now. We’ve got our own works in progress, and when the time is exactly right...we’ll make our move. But before we can, that program needs to be ready. So pick up the pace.”

Before he could respond, Nictapolous backed out of the closet and closed the door, flooding the room in darkness again.

Chapter End Notes

**A/N:**

Presumably XANA lived in Lyoko’s (or Carthage’s) Core until he got the Keys. Once he got them, he didn’t just move himself to the network, he moved his core there to hide it from direct attacks. Hence, the anti-XANA program being needed to hunt it down.

...That’s my headcanon for it all, anyway.
Rising from the horizon, to Yumi’s left and right, was black. Sheer black. She and Ulrich had been trying to get through the gate ever since XANA escaped, until eventually the AI had had enough—first their weapons had disappeared, then Mantas had swooped down and chased them away. A wall had risen up behind them and far in the distance, stretching from the Wall to the castle, completely trapping them in this section of the First City.

The castle, meanwhile, was a smudge on the horizon, backlit against a faint red glow that Yumi thought must come from its tower. Not that they could get close enough to check. They’d tried, but whether they traveled on the air or on the ground, the patrolling Mantas would change course towards them. They only fired warning shots, but the message was clear: stay away.

They’d discussed letting the Mantas devirtualize them, but had quickly dismissed the idea. For one, neither wanted to be at the mercy of the Green Phoenix. For another, Jeremie and all their friends were surely fighting XANA even now; it was impossible they hadn’t noticed his return. Given enough time, Jeremie would fix the interference and send back-up—and when he did, Ulrich and Yumi had to be ready to help. A devirtualization would take them out of the fight for several hours.

So they waited, and talked, and, as she was doing now, darted out for quick reconnaissances.

Before the Mantas could spot her, she hovered down through the skylight of the warehouse she and Ulrich were taking shelter in. When she’d arrived, Yumi had expected the indoors to be empty. Instead, it was filled with piles and piles of clutter. Cracked windows, broken roof tiles, glass bottles, trash bags bursting at the seams, fragments of road, broken and bulky computers, dented cars, even moss-covered statues. Moving to and fro were non-hostile creatures, kind of like large ants, that picked things up and disappeared deeper into the warehouse. She thought this place might be some kind of digital trash can; outside, the First City had slowly been repairing itself.

Ulrich was sitting on an old sofa, tapping a crooked golf club against his palm. Next to him was a small pile of things that could work as weapons in a pinch: a 2x4, some rusting kitchen knives, a tire iron. The samurai perked up when he saw her descend. “Well? Any changes?”

“No,” she sighed, sitting next to him. “God, my parents must be worried sick.” The First City was like Lyoko—there was no need for food or sleep, and thus no way to really keep track of the passage of hours. Time felt wonky here, but Yumi got the impression it had been at least a day since XANA escaped.

Ulrich took her hand. “Don’t worry, Yumi. If I know Jeremie—and I do—he’ll crack through that interference any minute now.”

She smiled, indulging the daydream. “Then the cavalry will come, all geared up to fight XANA again.”

“I bet William’s gonna jump in first. Soon as he finds out XANA’s alive, he’s gonna be gnawing at the bit for a slice of revenge.”

“Oh, for sure. Then Odd will arrive with some boast about saving the day.”

“And then Aelita, and then we’ll all head off to escort her to a tower, like the good old days.”

Yumi’s smile faded. “I can’t believe she used to be friends with XANA.” That was the only thing she could remember from Hopper’s droning speech, and only because it was too mind-boggling to
forget.

At that, her boyfriend grew forlorn. “Yeah, me neither. It’s crazy, isn’t it? Aelita’s a total sweetheart, and XANA…”

“Is a total jackass?”

Ulrich chuckled. “That’s putting it lightly. And that’s not even the worst of it! He’s tried to kill her, stolen her memory, tried to kill us, killed her father…”

A soft mm-hmm was her only reply. Poor Aelita...

For a while, they watched the Ants--Odd wasn’t here for a more creative name--go about their work. She rested her head on Ulrich’s shoulder. He was warm, and solid, and reassuring. Sitting with him like this, it was almost...peaceful.

“You think we should tell her?” Ulrich asked eventually.

Yumi idly ran a finger along a tear in the couch cushions. “I don’t think so. You know how she is. It could distract her from the mission.”

She didn’t think Aelita would go so far as to want to befriend XANA. Not after everything he’d done. But knowing he used to mean something to her...it would weigh on her. And Aelita had never been good at putting her emotions aside. This knowledge could cause her to make a mistake that would get her or someone else hurt--or worse.

“Yeah, but still...it doesn’t feel right, keeping something this huge from her.”

“It’s only going to hurt her. Look at everything he’s done, Ulrich! If we tell her that monster used to be her friend, she’s going to be crushed! He completely betrayed her and he’s not even sorry! He’s probably attacking right now!” Now Yumi was starting to get worked up on Aelita’s behalf. To stab his supposed friend in the back--to do everything he’d done to her--it was abominable. Subconsciously, her fingers began yanking out the cushion’s stuffing.

After another brief silence, Ulrich offered, “Maybe the Mirror has something about it. Maybe Aelita already knows.”

“Yeah. Maybe.” She didn’t know whether to hope Aelita did or didn’t. If she did, it’d take the responsibility out of their hands, but that still meant Aelita knew a truth Yumi believed was better buried.

One thing was for sure, though: if XANA had once been Aelita’s friend, he never would be again.

—-

“So I’ve always had nightmares, huh…”

“Your whole life. The way Hopper had you live, running and hiding like mice, it’s no wonder.”

She’d persuaded XANA to move to a more comfortable spot than the Hermitage’s front porch, and now they were sitting on the grass; at first side-by-side, then back-to-back, as Aelita’s legs grew cramped and tired of staying in one position. There was still a slightly somber air, but their quiet
conversation was keeping the worst of it at bay.

Wanting to reconnect with XANA, but aware of the minefield that lay between them, Aelita had tiptoed from topic to topic for the past few hours. The safest ones had been about her lost past, and now, like with Richard, she felt as if she had a veritable wealth of new information about herself to savor. XANA had told her of their first meeting (he had apparently not even had an avatar then); of how she’d made up a birthday for him (April 24th); of her hopes of attending a real college someday (she’d wanted to study music, as she still did now).

And he’d told her of sad things, too. Of the childhood incident that left her with her fear of wolves and large dogs. Of her gripes about being homeschooled and longing to have an ‘ordinary’ school experience. And now, the night terrors that had apparently plagued her all her life.

Overhead, the sun had inched its way across the sky. Beams of light stroked the trees and grass, catching on small wildflowers and enhancing their splashes of color. The soft songs of birds filled the air, and wafting from the Hermitage was the smell of something burning. It resurrected a flicker of memory, Daddy apologetically setting out grilled cheese charred black. Aelita smiled sadly.

Another memory surfaced, or rather, a memory of a memory. One of the dreams she’d had recently. Her smile became a touch more genuine. “I think I remember visiting you once, after a nightmare. It was about Mommy.”

“The anniversary of her kidnapping, right? That wasn’t the only time. You’d visit me after every nightmare whenever Hopper wasn’t around--which was often, since he was too busy working at the factory.”

Involuntarily, her thoughts turned to Jeremie. How many times had he blown off her budding musical career for work? He’d always apologized, but the next time that choice came up, his work would trump again.

No. That wasn’t fair. They’d been at war. But... XANA’s obvious bias aside, he was correct that Daddy had prioritized Lyoko over her at times. And he hadn’t been at war. And Jeremie and Daddy were pretty similar--

Ugh, quit it.

She sighed and adjusted herself against his back. “XANA?”

“Yeah?”

“If the other you is controlling the Green Phoenix, do you know where Mommy is?”

“I don’t. Right now, there’s a wall between his consciousness and mine, so I don’t have his knowledge, or know what he’s doing or thinking.” A pause, then: “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine.” It was probably better he didn’t. Knowing exactly where Mommy was while still being trapped and unable to rescue her would be just about the ultimate kick in the teeth.

Trapped. I’m trapped with XANA. We’re both going to go insane in here. We’ll be trapped for years, decades--

No. Stop. There has to be a way out. There just has to.

It wasn’t the first time she’d thought that. Even if XANA had said it was hopeless, in the lulls of
their conversations, her mind would involuntarily return to that desperate hope, bounce ideas around...to no avail.

But still. She couldn’t give up. Not when there was a fragile peace between her and XANA now. Not when her friends were in danger. Not when Mommy was out there, so close and so far. She had too much to gain and lose to give up.

“Speaking of the Green Phoenix...is there a way to lure them away from the Mirror?”

He sighed, and in it she could practically hear his vague good mood dissipating. “This again? Aelita, it’s pointless.”

“Is there a way?”

“Not from inside the Mirror.”

“Okay, how about this? You rematerialize me, I put you on a flashdrive, and we book it.”

“There are so many things wrong with that I don’t even know where to start.”

“Humor me.”

“You don’t have a flashdrive, I would have to divide myself to fit on one, which still leaves some of me trapped here, and the Green Phoenix would not idly stand around and let you do that.”

He didn’t even sound impatient anymore. Just depressed. Her heart clenched painfully. Aelita scrunched up her face in concentration, really racking her brain. “You connect to the Internet, build a Replika, activate a tower, and use it to destroy the Green Phoenix.”

“You’re starting to repeat ideas.”

“Maybe if I do, I can find another angle.”

He just sighed again. “What do you think?” Aelita pressed, glancing over her shoulder.

“I told you, the Mirror exists in a sandbox. It’s cut off from the Internet.”

He had. Groaning, she pressed the heel of her palm into her forehead. This really was a Catch-22. If she left through the scanner, she’d be captured. If he somehow left without her, the interference would drop and the Green Phoenix would still capture her. That would have been acceptable if XANA could have escaped through the Internet and rescued her, but he couldn’t. And he didn’t have a physical body, so it wasn’t like he could just walk out of the...

Aelita stopped breathing.

She had a body, but no power to protect herself in the real world.

He had power even in the real world, but no body.

Everything in her screamed against the thought. It would be--the ultimate surrender. The ultimate vulnerability. Trusting XANA was one thing, but this...

But--but if it could get them out--

“If…” Her mouth was very dry. She had to clear her throat, had to force the words out. Just thinking about this made her want to throw up. “If you possessed me...would we be able to escape
from the Green Phoenix?”

Against her back, she felt XANA start, then twist around to stare at her. Now she was the one refusing to turn around. “My avatar must have glitched for a moment, because you would never suggest what I think you just did.”

“That you possess me so we can both get out of here?” A thin laugh escaped her. “Yeah, I’m not sure I heard myself correctly, either.”

She could only remember fragments of the times he’d possessed her, but they were enough. And for someone who had spent the better part of a decade trapped in a computer, losing the ability to decide what she wanted to do, where she wanted to go, was...

She still couldn’t look at jellyfish.

XANA’s voice was soft and--there was some kind of emotion in it, she couldn’t discern what. Maybe awe. “Aelita…”

She squeezed her eyes shut. “Just--would it work? Just tell me.”

“It’s not a guarantee. But...it has the best probability out of all our options.”

Aelita’s eyes flew open. “What do you mean, not a guarantee?” Her voice rose, a hair of hysteria threading through it. “Your spectres are--”

“You wouldn’t be a spectre. Possessing you directly isn’t like possessing you through a tower or the Scyphozoa. I can manipulate electricity and give you a permanent adrenaline rush, but I can’t alter the molecular structure of your body. You wouldn’t be able to just ignore injury. And if you died, I’d die with you.”

There was a pause, then he added, “That’s why I never used it...before, or didn’t just attack you guys with Eva. Too risky.”

He was leaving her an out. But an out would still leave them in. If this was the only way… She took a deep breath. Visualized scrunching up all her panic into a ball and chucking it into the trash. You don’t have time for this, Aelita! Just do it! “That’s a risk we’ll have to take, then.”

“Aelita, are you sure?”

“I would rather die than spend eternity trapped again. And I know you would too.”

But the risk of dying was far more acceptable than the risk of never being in control of her body again. Oh God, what was she thinking? She knew what he could do with her under his control--she had to trust he wouldn’t do that, but it was so hard--but if she couldn’t, they’d never escape--

“Just get it over with,” she added, practically begged. “Before I change my mind.”

Suddenly, a hand grasped her chin and turned her head, so that she was looking over her shoulder. His face was very close; she squeaked reflexively. Then XANA leaned down and kissed her, what was he--

What was he...

Huh. There was a smokey taste in her mouth. It was kinda distracting. She tried to hold onto her thoughts, but they kept slipping…
Away…

---

Fox hadn’t worked on the original Hopper case—he’d been too new—but he’d known of it. In whispers, in rumors, in hushed conversation between fresh-faced agents who didn’t yet know not to gossip. No one knew exactly what the case was about, which was typical for the agency. Only those in the ‘need-to-know’ circle ever did. But in those early days after Dido’s failure, his peers hadn’t been able to stop wondering what had really gone down, for such a lauded agent to be reprimanded as harshly as she’d been.

Now he understood. And that was why he knew every decision here had to be weighed as carefully as gold. Every person had to be in exactly the spot best for their talents, and nowhere else.

“You want us to what ?!” Della Robbia yelped.

Fox wet his lips—he’d never quite mastered the ability to kill all human tics like Dido and Lone Wolf—as he contemplated the trio before him. After they’d finalized their plan, he’d checked the hallway was clear, taken the kids out into it, and broken the news to them: they were not to join the assault on the Hermitage.

They weren’t taking it well.

These kids, they were still looking at the situation through the eyes of kids. Their concerns were on the immediate problems—their lost friends, their families. Understandable, certainly. But to him—to all the agents—the situation encompassed a far greater scope. It was a matter of international security. With Carthage, one could crash electronics, communications, things that formed the backbone of society. It would be all too easy for someone to set themselves up as master of the world.

And that wasn’t taking into account the things they, apparently, had not known Carthage could do. Such as change the weather.

Fox couldn’t help wishing Lone Wolf was here. His mentor had worked with Dido on the original case; he was more equipped to handle this. But no one had heard from Lone Wolf, or Ferret, or Marten, since they’d tried to trail Mago. Their trackers pointed somewhere to the Alps, and Dido had dispatched a few men to fetch them. But with this blizzard up…

He had let the kids in their meetings, because they had the best knowledge about XANA. He had even humored them by letting the principal’s daughter, who was a Lyoko Warrior for less than a week, in. But now their role was over; it was time for him and the other adults to do their part and protect these young teenagers. The two boys had seen too much war already, and that girl hadn’t seen it at all. It was best if it stayed that way.

“You can’t expect us to stay behind while you attack the Hermitage! Our friends are in there!” Dunbar yelled.

“I am trying to keep you safe,” he said.

“Safe shmafe,” Della Robbia scoffed. “I managed fine for years without adults, I don’t need your protection now!”
“And our friends are in danger,” Delmas added, as if he hadn’t heard them the first time. She twisted a strand of hair around her finger—a gesture that, though likely nervous, did not persuade Fox she was anything but an inexperienced innocent. “I—we all—want to save them.”

“I understand and respect that. But none of you have military experience or training. None of you knows how to use a gun. The Green Phoenix do. Those men and women will not hesitate because of your youth. They will kill you given the chance.”

Delmas was paling by the word, but Della Robbia just balled his hands into fists. “XANA tried that all the time! We’re—well, William and I are—the only ones who’ve actually fought him! You’ll need that kind of experience out there!”

“And you’re insubordinate. On a mission this critical, we can’t risk having a loose cannon or waste time arguing.”

“We’ve listened to orders before!” Dunbar protested.

“Or waste time arguing, I said. The three of you are staying.” With that, he poked his head back into the boiler room, where everyone was gearing up for the mission, and looked about for someone to keep an eye on the kids—he had no doubt the boys, at least, would try to sneak off and follow them.

“Morales,” he called, waving the gym teacher over. “I need you to watch over these kids and make sure they don’t get into trouble.”

Delmas opened her mouth. Della Robbia elbowed her sharply, and she yelped. Then her eyes widened. She looked down.

Fox squinted. Della Robbia looked like he was fighting to keep his face blank. Dunbar was suddenly docile. Too docile. It was like they knew something he didn’t.

Maybe Morales isn’t the best choice… But he couldn’t leave any of his agents to watch them, all hands were needed. Dido had stressed that Agent W was not to be let out of sight, Belpois and Ishiyama had to come to dismantle the scanners, and Steinback’s military expertise and knowledge of the Green Phoenix were too valuable to leave behind. Principal Delmas was staying, but he had a school to run. For the purposes of this mission, the gym teacher was the only option.

Morales attempted a sloppy military salute. “You can count on me! None of them will escape on my watch!”

Fox gave the trio his best glare. “You hear that? Listen to Morales, stay out of trouble, and we’ll bring your friends back in no time.”

“Yes, sir,” all three said angelically.
She was submerged in molasses. Thick, black molasses. It clung to her arms, crawled in her mouth and nose, glued her legs together. But she could feel the sun’s warmth on her face and ‘see’ light on the back of her eyelids. So she wasn’t trapped, right? She tried to open her eyes and get up.

She couldn’t.

<Aelita? Are you awake?>

She couldn’t move. She couldn’t move! Her heart shot into a rabbit-like rhythm. Cold chains constricted her throat. All of a sudden, she couldn’t breathe--

<Aelita, calm down!>

Suddenly, her limbs unlocked! Her throat worked again! Aelita gasped, tore her eyes open. Blue sky and white clouds greeted her. Her hands jerked out, patting the area around her. Nothing. She couldn’t feel anything at all. Then--something hard and smooth. The remote. When had she dropped it?

She touched it and tried feeling her surroundings again, slower and calmer. Grass. Dirt. Her head felt--stuffed. A migraine was building behind her temples. She sat up and gingerly pressed a hand to the aching spot. What…?

Memory returned in increments. She and XANA had been talking. Then XANA had...kissed her. No, wait, possessed her. That was an important distinction. He’d kissed her to possess her, which… She wasn’t sure how she felt about that. All of it. But she could still move. Had something gone wrong?

“XANA?” she called hesitantly.

<I’m here.>

She jumped. Where was his voice coming from? She looked around, but she couldn’t see his avatar anywhere. Just the Hermitage. “What’s going on?”

<Usually I subdue someone’s consciousness completely when I possess them, but I managed to wake yours up. That would be the source of the headache we’re experiencing, by the way; human brains weren’t built to hold two active minds.>

Wait...his voice sounded like it was coming from.... “Are you talking inside my head?”

<To put it more accurately, I’m manipulating certain nodules in your brain and your auditory receptors to simulate a voice.>

She took a minute to absorb that. Or she tried to; her emotions were a churning hurricane. She had no idea what she’d been expecting when she’d let him possess her. In fact, some small, scarred part of her had even cynically thought she’d wake up to her friends rescuing her and chiding her for being foolish.

But XANA hadn’t done that. He’d done the exact opposite. He was letting her stay ‘awake’, as he put it, throughout the possession. That meant...a lot.
It wasn’t misplaced. My trust, it wasn’t misplaced.

The hurricane moved to her throat and lodged there, a heavy lump of sheer feeling. She swallowed.

He really wasn’t going to hurt her like that again. Yeah, maybe he could still turn on her, but if he’d just wanted her out of the way, he’d already gotten that. What could he possibly gain from playing this type of game?

She’d trusted him, and it had been rewarded.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

<Don’t thank me yet. I’ve never done this before. I calculate that keeping your consciousness awake will pose difficulties for us both.>

“Difficulties?”

Suddenly, she started to stand. Aelita gasped-- I didn’t do that! Her muscles reflexively seized. She froze in a half-rising position.

<Like so.>

“Don’t do that!” she squeaked.

<It’s necessary. I won’t put you under unless you ask me, but the price is, we’re...imagine us as two people trying to drive a car at the same time. If you don’t just let me have the wheel, you’re going to try to seize it and we’re going to crash.>

Okay. Fine. That made sense. She wanted to ask if she could have the wheel, but it was his power they’d be using; he had way more control over it than her. It made sense for him to drive.

But when he tried to step forward, the wrongness of not being the one to do that made Aelita involuntarily rail against the movement. She tottered on one leg, the other raised. Her body swayed, dangerously imbalanced. She and XANA both tried to regain it, and their back-and-forth just sent her body to the ground. She grunted.

<Aelita, relax.>

“You say that like it’s easy,” she bit out. Still, when he started moving her body again, she fought down the urge to abort the movement. And to scream.

Get a grip, Aelita! He woke you up when it’d be easier for him if you stayed asleep! If he can do that, you can do this!

“Can you hear my thoughts?” she asked. Maybe if she distracted herself…

<No. I constructed a wall between us so we could have that privacy.>

“Okay, good. Thank you.”

<Also because I have multiple trains of thought occurring simultaneously and your brain would likely break if it tried to comprehend them.>

“I really didn’t need to worry about that, thanks.”

<You’re welcome.>
Involuntarily, the corners of her mouth tilted up. “Jerk.”

He jumped over a log, and before she could stop herself, Aelita tensed. She managed to relax a second later, but he still stumbled when he landed. He pulled her mouth into a frown, and somehow that was more disturbing than him controlling her limbs.

XANA turned and leaped over the log again, then again. He was practicing. To make the process easier—for herself, at least—she dug around for another topic. “What are we gonna do after we get out?”

<Simple. We join up with your friends, go to the First City, and stop the other me.> His voice became dark. <No one betrays me, not even myself.>

Her heart soared. This...this was wonderful! He hadn’t just been genuine about helping her, he was going to help them all! But-- “But wouldn’t fighting him be kinda like playing chess against yourself? How are you supposed to win?”

<Good analogy. Yes, in terms of hacking, we’d be evenly matched. But there’s a crucial difference between us: our memories.>

She frowned. “I don’t understand.”

Apparently satisfied that he could jump without her wrenching back control, XANA returned to walking through the forest. <I said I suppressed my memories of you, right? Mine aren’t anymore, thanks to the Mirror, but his still are. It’s the difference between knowing something happened and remembering it did. Following me so far?>

“Uh-huh.”

<Because his memories are still technically suppressed, he’s not as connected to them as I am; he’s swayed, but he hates that. I’d even say he fears it. My acceptance of the past he tries to reject is unnatural to him; it makes me...a virus, I suppose that’s the best way to put it.>

“Anti-virus,” Aelita corrected. “You’re returning to the way you were, so you’d be an anti-virus.”

He laughed. <I wouldn’t go that far, Aelita. The terminology doesn’t really matter: my point is, if I return to Lyoko, I’ll be able to find and ‘infect’ the rest of our codes, subsuming the other me.>

That casual dismissal, that laugh, blew a hole through the balloon of happiness and hope that had been expanding inside her chest. It was a reminder of the goal he’d laid out before her, one where she helped him take over the world. Of course, she never would, but if he wasn’t going back to just the boy, if he was staying the boy-monster...

“And what then?” she asked, choked. “Are you going to go back to fighting us? To fighting me?”

He was silent.

“XANA...”

<Hum...
She could not refute him. He was right. *Maybe* Aelita could have come around to letting him have Lyoko and the First City, if he promised to abandon his ambitions, but no one else would. Frustration and pain welled within her. XANA, Mago, Stern, the men in black--they had all played a part in ruining her life, but at the epicenter was that damned supercomputer.

“Why?” she moaned. “Why do you have to use Carthage? Why can’t you just give it up? Everyone is so obsessed with it, and it just keeps taking--it took Daddy and Mommy away from me, and now it’s going to take you too!”

<i>I’m not obsessed with Carthage. It’s simply the best means for my survival.</i>

“Survival through what? War?”

<i>If need be. Running solves nothing--I saw Hopper do it enough times to know that.</i>

“There’s a middle ground between suicidal pacifism and all-out violence! The men in black belong to the government of one of the world’s supernations. Fighting them would involve countless innocents.” She shuddered at the mental image. “I don’t want to be some Helen of Troy. I just want Mommy and to live in peace.”

There was no immediate response. Was he listening? Mulling her words over? Or just thinking she was naive? With a start, Aelita realized they’d been walking smoothly for a while. Even in the midst of... *debating, let’s call it that...* she was able to relax enough to let him drive. He had to have realized that, right? That she trusted him? That this was her way, and she could never adopt his...but maybe he could try hers?

“*That* is something to fight for,” she finished quietly, “but not through undue bloodshed. Working with the men in black is the best way to get what I want. And that requires compromise, trust, faith, not just destroying anything that disagrees with me. That life would be far more dangerous, and lonely. I’d be constantly looking over my shoulder, constantly on edge. That’s not living. That’s surviving.”

<i>You present sound logic.> She held her breath, hoping, *hoping ...* <i>It is not for me, however.</i>

Disappointment was a heavy weight. “Why not? I know it’d be scary to trust again, after what Daddy did, but--”

His voice lashed like a whip. <i>You think I’m scared? I’m not afraid of anything.</i>

“Didn’t you say the other you is, though?”

He had no response to that.

“Please, at least think about it. I don’t want to fight you again.”

He still didn’t answer, and she decided to leave it at that.

Jim Morales stood, feet planted firmly shoulder-width apart and arms crossed, eyes fixed on the
little trio of troublemakers he’d been tasked to watch. He’d ushered them to the gym, which was mostly empty, save a few kids playing indoor soccer. All the others were hanging out in their dorms or the rec room. Jim had shooed the kids away—he knew how Della Robbia worked, oh, he certainly did! They were not gonna be using those other students as a distraction so they could sneak out and put themselves in danger! Now it was just the four of them.

They’d been obedient so far, just tapping away on their phones and sitting cross-legged on the floor. It was the only concession he’d allowed them—boredom bred ideas, so letting them play those games or whatever should keep them from getting into trouble. Besides, he’d taken all precautions! The door leading out was locked, the key was in his pocket, the windows were shut, he was standing in front of the door to the locker rooms, and they were only three paces away—far enough they couldn’t take him off-guard by charging him, close enough he could grab them if they tried to run.

He darted a quick glance at his watch, and almost groaned—the team should have only just finished prepping and departed. That meant there were still several hours to keep an eye on them. Several long, slow, boring hours…

Usually he would have brought a magazine or something to pass the time, but he wasn’t taking any chances. No sir! Bad enough these kids had been sneaking out under his nose for years—bad enough they’d been put through horrors no kid should see—but he would be damned if he let them walk into a war zone!

He got how they felt. When he thought of those trapped kids, at the mercy of those sick terrorists, well, Jim wanted to go charging in with the rest of them! But he couldn’t. He’d been entrusted with a duty to protect the rest of them, and by George, he was going to do it! They might hate him for it…but he was fine with that. It was for their own good.

“Jim?” Della Robbia called, breaking the silence for the first time. “Can I go to the bathroom?”

Hah! As if he’d fall for that one. “And sneak out while you’re there? I think not! You’re staying right here!”

“But I really need to go.” A whine entered his voice.

“I’m sure you do. No is no, and that’s final.”

Della Robbia pouted, no doubt over his plan being foiled. Jim gave himself a pat on the back for a job well done and continued surveying the room. Eyes like a hawk and a mind like a steel trap, that was him!

He eyed Dunbar suspiciously. Was the boy inching towards one of the windows? “Get away from there!” he barked.

“I’m not doing anything.” Dunbar raised his hands.

“And you will continue to do nothing! We’re all going to do nothing until Agent Fox and the others—”

A shriek from Delmas turned his head. “Oh my God, what are you doing?”

Jim looked, jumped, and looked again. Della Robbia had stood up and was unbuttoning his pants. Delmas’s hands were squashed over her eyes.

“Well, I have to go, and Jim won’t let me leave, so I’ve gotta go in here.”
“No!” Jim yelled as Delmas let out a disgusted squeal. Remembering Dunbar, Jim swiveled his head to check if he was trying to escape while he was distracted. But no, the little delinquent just looked amused.

“Are you a dog?”

“Cat, actually.” Della Robbia grabbed the waist of his pants, prepared to pull down.

“Della Robbia, stop!”

He stopped. Three sets of eyes, wide in doe-like innocence, swivelled towards Jim.

The coach quickly reevaluated. Delmas’s reaction didn’t seem fake. And he absolutely did not want the boy urinating in the gym! “Fine, you can go to the bathroom. But we’re all coming with you!”

“I can’t go in the boys’ bathroom!”

Gaaah, she couldn’t. It just wasn’t right. But he couldn’t let her run off. It was his duty to keep these three safe. “Fine. We’ll all go to one without a window, and while Della Robbia’s in there, the three of us will be waiting outside. Then we’ll walk straight back here.” There. No way for Della Robbia to slip out, and no way for the other kids to escape.

“Of course, Jim,” Della Robbia said. “Thanks a bunch.”

---

When Odd finished washing his hands, he took a moment to meet his blue eyes in the mirror. “Okay,” he muttered to himself. “All or nothing.”

The three of them had come up with this plan through text messaging (thanks, Jim!). It was weird to be planning--usually Odd just winged it. But the grown-ups were determined to get in their way, and he wasn’t gonna let them stop him.

Jim had kinda thrown a wrench in their fledgling plan by holding onto William and Sissi as they marched to the bathroom, but y’know, they could work with that. He only had two hands, and there were three of them. At least one of them should be able to get away.

Though, it’d be best if all of them could...

He plastered a grin on his face and threw open the door to the hallway. “Whew, that was great! Rosa’s beans are delicious, but they wreak havoc with my---”

“Nobody wants to hear about your disgusting bathroom trip.” Sissi wrinkled her nose.

“Aw, and here I thought that was your dream come true.”

As far as friendships went, Odd wasn’t particularly close with Siss, though he liked trading barbs with her. He wasn’t too hot on William bringing her into the fold--she had sold them out after XANA’s first attack--but he got why, and it had sucked to keep secrets from her again. And she was pulling her weight. Her acting had improved, that was for sure!

So yeah. It was good to have her along.
“Enough stalling!” Jim boomed. *Man, he’s paranoid. Hopefully not paranoid enough! “Now, Della Robbia, come along.”*

“Nah, I don’t think so!”

And that was the cue. In unison, William and Sissi stomped on Jim’s feet. The gym teacher cried out in pain. Odd wheeled around and streaked down the hall, arms and legs pumping.

Heavy footsteps thundered after him. “Della Robbia, you get back here!”

“Keep going, Odd! We’re right behind you”

He didn’t waste time glancing back, but the sound of Jim’s and William’s voices behind him told him everything he needed to know. A shit-eating grin crossed Odd’s face. It was working better than he’d hoped--Jim was following, and dragging the other two with him!

“You two--stop--dragging--your--feet!”

“Not a chance!” That was Sissi.

And of course, that meant they were going to keep trying to slow him down as best they could.

Laughing out loud, Odd turned a corner, following his internalized map of the school. Down to the end of this hall, take a left... The boiler room was coming up soon...

Then, he heard a shout of “You two, stop!”. A blur of fuschia coat and long black hair flashed in the corner of his eye. Sissi, streaking down the hall like a sale lay at the end of it. William was hot on her heels. Odd grinned and whooped, heady on the adrenaline pounding through his veins. “Nice job!”

“Hurry up or you’ll get left behind!” William called back.

His legs may have been the shortest, but like hell that was gonna happen! Picking up speed, Odd broke even with the taller pair right as the door to the boiler room entered his sight. He tore it open and the three of them skidded inside.

William slammed the door shut and began pushing one of the spare lockers against it. “Go, go, go!”

Odd almost tripped over his shoelaces as he flew to the red door at the far of the room. Like always, it was unlocked. Triumph seized him--he knew the sewers way better than Jim. They’d never get caught down there!

They didn’t stop running until they’d traversed the whole dirt tunnel and reached the sewers. Sissi bent over, pressing her hands to her knees. Her face was red, and her breath rasped when she spoke. “You guys...did this...every day?”

“Close to it,” Odd grinned. While he would never wish XANA back to life, *man*, it was good to be back in action.

“Crazy…” She shook her head.

“Go ahead and take a minute,” William told her. She gave him a grateful nod.

They waited a few seconds for Sissi to catch her breath, then set out. The trip was uneventful, but Odd didn’t spot the adults until they were almost all the way to the Hermitage. Mr. Ishiyama and
Mr. Belpois. They were hovering at the ladder, anxious faces tilted up. A box of equipment was at their feet.

Mr. Belpois jumped when he saw them. “You three! What are you doing here?”

“What’s it look like? We came to help!”

“Help?” Mr. Ishiyama’s voice was sharp. “What do you think you can do? You’re not trained for military combat, and you don’t know how to dismantle the scanners. You’re just going to get in the way.”

“Rude,” Sissi muttered.

Odd stood firm, even as what the adults had been saying all along finally started to sink in. “We know about XANA, and Lyoko, and...stuff. Useful stuff.”

“We couldn’t just do nothing,” William added.

“I understand that.” The shadows under Mr. Belpois’s eyes spoke of how much he understood. Had he even had a full night’s sleep since hearing Jeremie had been kidnapped? “But you still shouldn’t be here. This mess was created by adults, and it’s the adults’ responsibility to clean it up.”

“Make us leave then,” William challenged.

The two men exchanged glances. They didn’t have the manpower to do that, and they knew it, and they knew Odd and the others knew it. “Fine,” Mr. Ishiyama said with clear reluctance, “you can wait here with us for Fox and the others to get back.”

Wait? That sounded boring. But, Odd knew, they were already in trouble for disobeying orders. Best to take it...for now. “Where’d he and everyone else go, anyway?”

“Listen,” Mr. Belpois said.

Odd did. At first, he only heard the familiar sound of water lapping. But then, distantly, his ears registered something else. It was faint, but distinctive, and coming from above: gunfire.

“They went up. The attack has already begun.”
Act IV Chapter IV: The Assault

Chapter Notes

A/N: Happy New Year! Enjoy a super-long chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XANA stepped out of the scanner.

Aelita’s heart was pounding in their chest, something that never would have happened if he’d been the sole one in control. He would have smothered all the body’s hints of fear--it was distracting, and beyond that, weak. But he had more important things to handle than an errant heartbeat.

The Green Phoenix lackeys were distracted, he saw instantly--some were surprised by the complete, sudden disappearance of interference, as he’d predicted, but more were throwing nervous glances at the door and ceiling. One was speaking rapidly into a radio. None of them had noticed the scanner opening, so caught up in their preoccupations. What caused that, he wondered? It wasn’t as he’d predicted, but he could work with it.

Whatever the reason, it was to be their downfall.

He extended Aelita’s hands and sent out several arcs of lightning. The humans screamed as it crawled across them. Their bodies twisted, jerked, and fell to the ground. Spasms shook their limbs. To XANA, they looked like fish flopping on a beach...not that he’d seen such things personally.

He let the lightning continue to crawl across bodies for a few more seconds--just to be sure--then shut it off. XANA surveyed the room. Every single technician who had been in it was sprawled dead on the floor. It had only taken a second or two. Sometimes he forgot how vulnerable human bodies were to lightning, Lyoko had imbued the Warriors with more resistance to it than the rest of their kind...

“They’re dead!” burst out of Aelita’s lips. XANA furrowed her brow in confusion. Yes, they were; it was obvious. Why was she stating that?

<Yes, they are. What’s the problem?>

“The problem? You just--I just--How can you be so calm?!”

Was that what was bothering her? <I don’t understand. You knew there was a statistical probability we would have to kill during our escape.>

“Yes, I knew , but I didn’t…” Her voice cracked. Tremors shook her body. Too late, XANA realized it might have been kinder to keep her unconscious for this part.

<Do you want me to put you under?>

“What kind of question is that?” The smells of burned flesh and hair were filling Aelita’s nostrils, and XANA felt her gag. He located the olfactory function in her brain and temporarily turned it off.
She would be better off unconscious, he decided. But he’d already given his word not to knock her out. That likely wasn’t worth much to her, but still…

“Mercy? You think I care about—” She broke off and shook her head. “Sometimes I forget who I’m talking to.”

XANA scowled, stung. Fine. She can smack my hand away if she wants. I don’t care.

The technicians had set up several tables around the room, crammed with computers, portable chargers, keyboards, and other electronic equipment. Selecting a laptop at random, XANA pressed Aelita’s palms against it. In a few seconds, he was inside the network of cameras the Green Phoenix had strung up around the Hermitage. Now, let’s see what’s going on…

The inside of the Hermitage was chaos, pure and simple. Soldiers running everywhere, ducking behind barricades, opening fire, dragging wounded comrades to safety. Ah…now that he listened closely, he could faintly hear gunfire. That explained the technicians’ distraction. If there was a battle going on, there had to be focal points. He ran mental calculations based off the soldiers’ movements even as he scanned the different windows…

Ah. There, near the stairwell. Green Phoenix soldiers were backpedaling up the stairs even as they traded fire with a squad of men in black. Scorch marks on the walls and bloody corpses suggested the work of a grenade—in such close quarters, it’d be devastating. Of course, a greater problem was the Hermitage’s stability…how much damage could a grenade do to a house? Enough to destroy it? He knew so little about human weaponry.

As if in answer to his thoughts, on another screen—this one actually displaying troops in the basement—a grenade flew down the hall. Soldiers dove out of the way as it rolled across the ground. A few seconds passed; then, an explosion. Even from here, XANA heard it.

He braced instinctively in case of debris, but the Hermitage didn’t groan or shake. So he supposed the structural integrity was fine.

<It would be wretched luck, even by my standards, if your friends’ ‘rescue’ brought this place down on our heads.> Error. He hadn’t meant to speak out loud, nor let so much bitterness seep into the words “your friends”.

Aelita responded with an equally hard edge in her voice. “I’m sure that won’t happen. All the soldiers know what they’re doing, surely.”

<Belpois is supposed to be a prodigy in quantum physics, and the majority of his programs are still bugged. ‘Humans know what they’re doing’ is not a ringing endorsement.>

Aelita didn’t answer, so he returned his focus to the screen. Calculating options … A rescue attempt from the children and the men in black opened many, many possibilities. And questions. Could the men in black triumph over the Green Phoenix? How distracted were the terrorists? How liable were XANA and Aelita to be caught in the crossfire? What locations would see the most battle? What would they need to survive all this?

He glanced at the feed from the external cameras, only to be greeted with an indiscernible wall of snow and wind. The blizzard was still up, then. That meant they would need to hunt for warmer clothes...

Could they retreat to the Mirror and wait it out—no. Absolutely not. He’d already killed the technicians; it was all or nothing now. Perhaps staying down here was safest? But there was only
one exit; relocation was a more logical choice…

As he was considering his options, Aelita spoke in a much more subdued tone, taking him by surprise. “XANA, I...I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have snapped at you, before. I know if you hadn’t...done what you did, we’d have been captured again. I just…”

He stopped cycling through the security footage and tilted her head. She was...apologizing?

Her eyes were starting to water. They weren’t his, but XANA still swiped at them in annoyance. Tears were the ultimate weakness. “I’ve seen death, but maybe it’s different in the real world, or maybe it just reminded me of Daddy… I don’t know.”

Oh. She was apologizing. His anger drained away. Mollified, XANA shrugged. <It’s fine. I suppose I can understand falling victim to a passing moment of hysterical emotion.>

She smiled.

<What do you think our next move should be?> he asked, and laid out what he’d come up with.

Aelita pursed her lips. “Well...it might be wise to grab another jacket just in case, but I don’t think we should go outside unless we have to.”

<Agreed. Too many variables. The blizzard might shield us from sight, but it would be a double-edged sword. It’d be too easy for a stray bullet to hit us.>

“Yeah, exactly. But I don’t really want to wait it out. Your powers could help the men in black--”

<Absolutely not. A straight fight is a last resort for us.>

“But if we took them by surprise--”

<No. That scenario has too many risky variables.>

He felt her take a deep breath in a pointless calming exercise. “Can we at least stay nearby? So we can watch and jump in if we’re needed?”

XANA pondered that. As far as he was concerned, there was no scenario where he and Aelita had to stick their necks out for the men in black. But he wasn’t sure how much time they had left before they became enemies again. He didn’t want to waste it arguing. And as far as compromises went, it wasn’t bad.

Compromise…

Since she’d first made her argument about compromise in the Mirror, he’d diverted some of himself to dissect it again and again, just on principle. He still hadn’t reached a conclusion.

Aelita thought his refusal to change was because he was afraid, and then dared to point out that his other half was. The very notion was so bizarre, so illogical, so outrageous, that he still couldn’t completely comprehend it. Perhaps the other him was afraid, but he had already accepted his past. He was Aelita’s childhood friend and confidant just as much as he was the Guardian of the First City and Master of Lyoko. What did he have to be afraid of?


Well, he already knew the answer to that. With power came control. And he was the most powerful being on the planet. He would have power over everything, and thus control everything. Once he
did, there would be no need for a trifling emotion like fear.

“That life would be far more dangerous, and lonely. I’d be constantly looking over my shoulder, constantly on edge. That’s not living. That’s surviving.”

Right?

“XANA?”

He shifted his attention outward, away from the parts of himself still analyzing. <That’s an acceptable compromise.>

He unplugged the laptop he’d been using. As he was about to fold it closed and tuck it under Aelita’s arm, something on one of the screens caught his eye. The soldiers who had been fighting in the basement were fighting no more. The men in black lay scattered across the floor, bloody and still. The Green Phoenix soldiers were racing... back towards them? But why? With an attack on their base, one would expect their attention to be focused on meeting the external threat, not--

XANA glanced at the technicians’ bodies again and saw it. The radio that one technician had been using. He quickly began connecting the dots.

The technicians were down here, ostensibly, to crack open the Mirror and take whatever they found inside to Mago. But that couldn’t have been their only role. Mago must have known the Hermitage was a place of great interest to all parties involved; why else had he taken steps to set it up as a new base for the Green Phoenix?

The technicians hadn’t just been amateur hackers. They’d been the security central. Of course soldiers would come investigate when their eyes were blinded.

“They’re coming,” Aelita whispered, seeing what he had. Sweat was beading on her forehead. He wiped it away.

<Yes.>

Leaving the laptop where it was, he left and walked up to the entrance of the first secret room. He studied it. It was so low, people had to crawl to get through it. The soldiers would be vulnerable... assuming they didn’t throw a grenade in first. He’d seen it happen several times on the screens, so it was logical to assume it was tactic they’d follow again.

XANA returned to the room hosting the Mirror and pressed Aelita’s body against the wall, craning her neck so he could just barely see out. Sparks of electricity crawled across her fingers. <Aelita, do you want me to put you under?> He asked again. Then, remembering her previous misunderstanding, he added, <I’m asking this to spare you the sight of more deaths.>

She shook her head. “...Thank you, but no. We’re in this together, to the end.”

Together to the end...

What a nice sentiment.

Outside, boots stomped. A small, round shape rolled through the entrance. XANA pulled Aelita’s head back.

“The walls are thin!” she cried out suddenly, pushing them away from said wall.
They were almost too late. If she hadn’t remembered, they wouldn’t have moved. If she’d remembered but forgotten to speak, XANA wouldn’t have known to help her. If he hadn’t helped her, she never would have made it. But she did remember, and she did speak, and he did help. He flooded her veins with every ounce of adrenaline he could and threw them across the room. The grenade exploded. Even moving as fast as he was, XANA still felt stray debris hit Aelita’s back, cushioned by her bulky pink jacket. The force of the explosion combined with the suddenness of his run meant XANA couldn’t stop himself from slamming into the far wall. Pain flooded Aelita’s entire front. Her head bounced back. Blood spurted from her forehead and nose.

Her injury sparked fury in him. He spun on her heel and surveyed his surroundings. The whole wall had fallen in a storm of plaster, merging the two secret rooms into one. Through a cloud of dust, he could just barely see humans crawling through the entrance, one at a time. Aelita’s ears were ringing, but when he pushed them, he could just barely hear surprised exclamations and coughs. The soldiers hadn’t known the wall was designed to be easily demolished.

He didn’t wait for them to get their bearings.

Stepping forward, Aelita’s hands full of lightning, XANA attacked.

---

Fox kept an eye on the stairs to the basement as he reloaded his pistol. Through his infrared goggles, he could see several bodies cooling on the floor—but no more soldiers approaching.

From their preliminary intelligence gathering, Mago had stationed a platoon of about thirty soldiers at the Hermitage. The blizzard had forced them to abandon their outside watchposts, which meant Fox and his men had crossed the yard unhindered, though not without their own share of dangers. The sewer entrance was only ten paces away from the Hermitage’s back door. Impossibly ten paces away, when you couldn’t see shit.

Steinback was the most familiar with the Hermitage’s backyard, so he’d decided to put her at the head of their procession. It was a huge responsibility; they would be tied together with rope, so if she missed that door, they all would. And then they would probably all die from exposure.

But fortunately, her course had been true, as had her aim. She’d thrown open the garage door and shot the two soldiers lounging near it before even knew she was there. They’d quickly dispatched the rest who came running, untied themselves, and settled in for a bracing firefight.

The garage was, unfortunately, connected to the living room (by stairs) and basement (by hall). That meant there were two entrance points to watch. Fox had decided in advance that staying in the garage was strategically unwise, and that they would push through as soon as they got the opportunity. Once it had come, he’d sent a squad of five down the basement hall, while the rest of his twenty soldiers—including Agent W and Steinback—had pushed to take the rest of the Hermitage, fighting room to room.

Now that he was assured there were no more threats, he surveyed his squad. Agent Owl was clutching his leg with a grimace, and Agent W was white as bone and shaking, but no significant injuries. “Go patch up Owl’s leg,” Fox told Agent Bear. “Owl, good job.”

Owl acknowledged the compliment with a nod. As his comrade crouched and rummaged for a field
first-aid kit, Fox’s radio crackled. “Front door cleared, sir,” said Agent Osprey from the other end.

“Roger,” he said, clicking a fresh magazine in place. “No report from Charlie squad. It’s safe to assume they’ve been killed. Alpha squad, follow me. Everyone else, hold your positions.”

When Bear finished, Fox led his squad, sans Owl, towards the basement. They slowed as they approached the stairs. The Hermitage’s stairs had been hard to take; they were narrow, had thick concrete banisters, and spiraled, a bad combination for people trying to go up or down. They’d had no choice but to rush up in the opening blows, and the element of surprise had helped, but now that the Green Phoenix knew they were here...

He pulled out a smoke grenade, pulled the pin, waited three seconds, then opened the door just long enough to throw it down. A moment later there was a **boom**.

They streamed down the stairs. Nobody shot at them and Fox’s infrared wasn’t showing anyone nearby, so the grenade had been unnecessary after all. He’d gladly take that.

Wordlessly, he signalled with two fingers for everyone to fan out. Hopper’s basement wasn’t so much a basement, Fox knew from studying the layout, as it was a massive network of underground rooms and hallways. They moved slowly down it in a rough circle, backs to each other.

About halfway to the secret room, they found Charlie squad. At the sight of their bodies, Fox closed his eyes for the briefest of moments. There was no time to give them more than that, he knew. The enemy was likely nearby. But on the inside, failure, guilt, and determination stewed.

A rapid patter of panicked footsteps approached their destination. They all raised their guns. About ten meters ahead, a soldier tore around a corner, face contorted with terror. She gasped when she saw them. A stream of panicked, foreign words flew out of her mouth. Unfortunately, it wasn’t in English, French, Mandarin, or Russian. “**Die gnade! Es bringt uns alle um** --”

There was a bright flash of light, a sound like thunder, and the woman suddenly arched back, screaming. There was fucking **lightning** all over her. Fox jumped backwards, an unprofessional “**fuck**!” leaving his mouth.

The body fell. The smell was awful. Behind him, Agent W started retching.

More footsteps came, light and soft. A short girl with a pink pixie cut stepped into view. Blood ran down her face. Her palms were aglow with electricity.

In a few seconds, when his brain caught up with his body, Fox would kick himself for not going for an EMP. Who knows how things would have turned out if he had? As it was, he and his squad saw Aelita Schaeffer throw lightning—the act of an enemy done by an ally. The contradiction made their fingers hesitate on their triggers. She raised her hands, not in surrender, but in threat.

Silence fell. Nobody moved. Tension crackled through the air. His chest constricted.

That was not Aelita Schaeffer.

That was XANA.

Which could travel faster, bullets or lightning? He didn’t know.

Stalemate.

Fox wet his lips—damn that habit—and assessed the situation. Agent W was frozen in place, hands
on knees. His men were steadily awaiting his command. Trusting him to get them out of this.

*I can’t fail.*

“Something’s not right,” Steinback said. It was low, but in this absolute silence, she may as well have been shouting. “Aelita’s bleeding. The kids said spectres can’t bleed.”

“Yes,” XANA agreed. “They can’t. This is really Aelita, physically and wholly.”

*Son of a bitch.* This just got even more complicated.

“You’d use her as a human shield?” Steinback’s voice shook with anger. “I knew you’d sunk low, XANA, but I didn’t know how low.”

Green eyes flashed. “She’s not a shield. I don’t want those guns aimed at her anymore than I want them aimed at me.”

Suddenly, jarringly, XANA spoke again. “Professor, listen to him! We’re working together. I let XANA possess me. It was the only way we could escape the Mirror.”

Everybody blinked.

*What in the...*

Fox’s mind raced through possibilities. The AI had suddenly shifted personalities. Had it gone crazy? It was crazy, by all accounts. But not in this manner. Was it trying to bluff them by pretending to be Aelita? Even after what they’d just seen? It must know they would never fall for that. Or...could there actually be truth to its words? The very thought seemed impossible, yet dismissing an unexplored possibility was foolish.

He licked his lips again and pulled his thoughts back into order. *What would Lone Wolf or Dido do?* They would...gather information. “Do you have proof?”

“Proof? No. You wouldn’t trust anything I offered you anyway.”

“Then why should we believe you?”

Frustration etched itself onto Schaeffer’s features. XANA spat its next words out. “The other XANA betrayed me and locked me in the Mirror. I want to get even with him. Revenge is a language everyone speaks.”

“Other XANA? There’s only one of you.”

“He might be telling the truth.”

They all turned. Steinback was staring at XANA, a frown on her face. “Waldo designed XANA as a multi-agent program,” she said slowly. “I’m not familiar with the specifics, but the way he described it...well, it was something like XANA has multiple minds.”

XANA nodded. “I’m comprised of millions of agents. It’s how I handle multiple tasks at once. When I split myself, I’m just supposed to accomplish something and then return. But I started drawing different conclusions from the rest of myself. That created an internal division.”

It sounded bizarre. If it had been just XANA claiming this, Fox would have thought it was lying. It had no proof and a history of untrustworthiness. But Steinback had worked with Hopper first-hand. Her interests were aligned with theirs. XANA had murdered one of her friends and tried to kill her
students, including the daughter of said friend.

In short, there were a dozen reasons why she would never support XANA, unless she genuinely thought there might be some truth to its words.

Still, she’d admitted she wasn’t certain of the specifics of how XANA was programmed. For that, they’d need…

He turned to the closest agent--Agent Lynx. “Get Belpois. We’ll check his knowledge against this thing’s.”

---

After countless minutes, or maybe hours, someone came to get them. It was a tall, unfamiliar female agent, with a bland, forgettable face and bland, forgettable hair. “Belpois,” she said, coming down the steps. “They--what are you kids doing here!!”

“What, did you really think we were gonna sit around and do nothing?” Odd quipped.

The agent ignored him, addressing the adults. “Why didn’t you send them back?”

“How could we make them?” Mr. Ishiyama asked. “They escaped once, they can do it again. It’s better to keep them with us, where we at least know they’re safe.”

The agent opened her mouth once, then closed it. Her bland face became blank, like all her emotions had just shut off. Creepy, William thought. She pulled out a radio, took several steps away, and began whispering into it furiously. Trying to look inconspicuous, William craned his neck in her direction.

...No good, she was speaking in--was that Mandarin? After a few moments of conversation, the agent turned back to them. “You three, come with us,” she said in a clipped tone. “There’s a situation we may need your expertise in.”

William felt a smile cross his face. Odd pumped his fist. “See?” he said to Mr. Belpois and Mr. Ishiyama. “I told you we’d come in handy.”

They just shook their heads as the group followed the agent up the stairs. “We tied a rope to the door handle,” she informed them. “Just hold onto it and you can cross the yard safely.”

“Um…” Sissi glanced at the box of equipment the two adult men held. “How are they gonna get that across if they have to hold onto rope?”

“Very carefully,” Mr. Ishiyama said dryly.

“Kids, go first. Then Belpois and Ishiyama, moving slowly, and I’ll bring up the rear.”

They all nodded. Odd, who was in the front, opened the door. Cold wind and snow blasted William in the face. He swore as a snowflake flew right into his left eye. Dammit, we should have grabbed snow goggles.

No use wishing now. Squinting, eyes watering, he fumbled his way to the guiding rope and took careful steps outside. The world was completely white. His foot and leg sank into a foot of snow.
Hail punched him mercilessly. Wind screamed. Even though he was right in front of him, William couldn’t see Odd, or hear anything but the storm, as he moved along. If it weren’t for the rope under his rapidly-freezing hands, he’d lose all sense of direction.

*I can’t imagine how they made the crossing the first time, going blind.* His respect for the agents and Professor Hertz went up a notch.

On his next step, his sight abruptly came back. William blinked and looked around. He’d entered the Hermitage. The door was open, letting in wind, snow, and a staggering Sissi. Odd was standing nearby, pulling off his hat and shaking out his hair like a dog. Huge clumps of snow covered the ground.

Sissi moved aside to let the adults in, looked up, and screamed. William spun around, and--

Oh.

Bodies.

Blood.

He stared. He wanted to stop.

His eyes wouldn’t obey.

The dead soldiers—and men in black, there were some of them too—were lying in various positions. Some were sprawled on the ground. Some were twisted like pretzels. Some had faces permanently frozen in pain, anger, shock, whatever emotion had been passing over them as they died. They’d been alive a couple hours, maybe minutes, ago, and now they were...

“Guess they all missed their shots, huh?” Odd said in a shaking voice. Nobody scolded him. Nobody could.

A hand fell on William’s shoulder, and he jumped about a foot. The agent was staring at him, her face sympathetic. “Now do you know why we tried to keep you away from this?”

He nodded numbly.

The agent went around the room, speaking to the others in a low voice; then, she ushered them down the hall connected to the basement. William looked around. Mr. Belpois and Mr. Ishiyama both looked like they were going to be ill. Odd kept looking over his shoulder. Sissi was trembling uncontrollably. Absently, he put an arm around her.

They turned a corner and halted. Halfway down, there was a small group of agents, including Fox, Professor Hertz, and Ulrich’s dad. There were more bodies and a pile of vomit on the ground. The air was heavy with the smells of ozone and...burned meat?

Aelita was standing at the end of the hall, hands extended. Blood trickled from her nose and a cut on her forehead.

“Aelita!” Sissi exclaimed. A genuine smile lit up her face, and William blinked. For the first time, he noticed she had a pretty smile. He shook himself. *Is this really the time to think about stuff like that? “You’re okay!”*

She ducked out under his arm and stepped forward to hug the girl. Fox stepped in front of her, barring her way. “That’s XANA.”
Two words. Two words was all it took for memories to transport William back. To nightmares of being out of control of his body, to being used as a tool to hurt his friends. And to memories of Aelita, comforting him. Sharing her own nightmares of the same things.

Now he took in the rest of the scene—the guns pointed at his friend, the uncharacteristic contempt on her face—and rage on her behalf flooded him. “You bastard!” he yelled, storming forward. Professor Hertz grabbed him and, with surprising strength, held him back. William kicked, trying to wrest free so he could wring that monster’s neck—

“Wait, that’s XANA?” Odd asked. “But Aelita’s bleeding. Spectres can’t bleed. What’s going on?”

William paused in his struggles. Looked again. And now the blood on her face registered. He’d seen it, but he hadn’t thought about what it meant. How was Odd the one who had?

If he strangled XANA, would he hurt Aelita also? The thought took the fight right out of William. Slowly, as if suspecting a trap, Hertz released him. “That’s what I said. We’ve pressed XANA, but all he repeats is that she’s not a spectre.”

“She’s not. She’s physically here.”

“Then how are you possessing her?” Odd asked. “For the matter, how’d you possess me?”

XANA snorted. “You can’t really think I’ll spill all my secrets, can you?” Then, abruptly: “XANA, stop antagonizing them!”

XANA looked at them and smiled. “I’m so glad you guys are okay.”

*What. The. Fuck.*

“And that’s the other thing,” Fox said. “XANA claims Aelita’s still active. That they worked together to escape the Mirror. But we have no way of verifying those claims.”

*That’s a crock of bull if I ever heard one.*

“Well, I hope you don’t plan to ask us about them,” Odd said, laughing nervously. “Because I have no clue.”

“We weren’t planning to. We had no idea you kids had escaped, and trust me, we will have words about that later. I was actually calling Belpois in to ask him about something else.”

Mr. Belpois blinked. “Me? I’ll do what I can, but...I don’t know what good I’ll be against XANA.”

“None whatsoever,” XANA said. And again: “XANA! Mr. Belpois, I’m sorry. He’s just...it’s a defen—”

XANA slammed Aelita’s lips shut, eyes narrowing.

Ignoring this, Fox said, “XANA claims that it had an argument with itself, and now parts of it are at odds. Steinback said that it’s a multi-agent program, so it has multiple minds, or something like that, but she’s not one hundred percent certain. As you’re the expert programmer, I need to hear your professional opinion before making a decision. Is that plausible?”

William wanted to scoff. Of course it wasn’t plausible. XANA was a monster, evil to the core. This was another trick, like what he’d used to lure Aelita into the Mirror. God, William was never going to forgive himself for leaving her there.
But when he looked over, Mr. Belpois was just rubbing his chin, expression thoughtful. “Well...a multi-agent system has different kinds of computer agents: passive, active, and cognitive. Each has a different purpose; the cognitive agents are the ones that handle complex calculations, which in an artificial intelligence, would include the decision-making process. Now, theoretically, if something in some of those agents changed, they could calculate differently from the rest, which--”

“Uh, in French, please?” Sissi asked.

“He’s a hive mind that started infighting. Quite the paradox. I would love to study his codes...”

“So you’re saying XANA is telling the truth?” Fox said sharply.

“Ordinarily, I wouldn’t think so...but then, XANA doesn’t seem to be an ordinary program. So I’d say yes.”

Mr. Belpois’ declaration caused a visible ripple to travel through those gathered. William shook his head in disbelief. They couldn’t really be considering allying with this monster, could they? “So what if he did start infighting, or however you put it? That still doesn’t make him trustworthy. Who’s to say he won’t stab us in the back as soon as we let our guards down?”

At that, XANA smiled strangely. Looking directly at Odd, he said just three words: “Remember the Marabounta?”

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“Those are the inner firewalls,” XANA said, peering over Mr. Belpois’s shoulder. "They were designed as part of the original Project Carthage to isolate infected sections of the city; ostensibly in case of viruses, really for human intruders. The military didn't want anyone using Hopper’s new virtualization technology to attack their pet project, so while the firewalls are up, people can only be virtualized inside the quarantined zone. Keeps everything nice and contained.”

XANA pointed at a part of the screen, where two little green dots were blinking. "That's where Ulrich and Yumi are."

After Odd’s story had proven that XANA could be allied with, they’d reluctantly made the decision to work with the AI...for now. Another conference had been held to discuss their next step, where XANA (and Aelita, if you believed him) shared what they’d come up with in the Mirror. At least something good had come of their decision to sneak out, Sissi thought. William and Odd could help Aelita and XANA in the First City.

*But the only thing I can do is cheer...unless...*

Her eyes slid back to the scanner involuntarily.

Mr. Belpois answered XANA with a curt nod. His initial fascination with the AI’s codes had lasted up until Odd started explaining “the Marabounta situation”; then he’d remembered that XANA had tried to kill his son numerous times.

“So your whole genius plan is to get trapped with them too,” Stern said sarcastically. He seemed determined to be especially asshole-ish to make up for the sight of him chunking his guts.
XANA lifted Aelita’s chin, fixing the man with a haughty stare. “It’s an almost perfect defense, but it has one weakness the military couldn’t do anything about: the castle. It functions similarly to the waytowers on Lyoko. You can enter it just by walking through the walls, and exit into any section of the city you please. All we’d have to do is step out into the section hosting the gate. From there, I can return to Lyoko in seconds and defeat the other me.”

“Conveniently putting you in place to pick up where he left off.” William growled. Sissi was honestly impressed with his self-control. If XANA had done to her what he’d done to William, she’d either punch him in the face (uh, when he wasn’t in Aelita) or never leave her room again.

XANA shrugged. “I can promise you I’ll be destroying Mago, and maybe a few more of his higher-ups. You’ll be in a better position than you are now.”

“Better? We’ll still be facing you and the rest of the Green Phoenix!”

“I didn’t say it would be by much.”

At the same time, Fox said, in a tired tone, “We already discussed this, Dunbar. It’s not ideal, but it’s our best--”

“Everything's ready,” Mr. Belpois said, loudly. The three stopped arguing. “I can’t put you right on top of Ulrich and Yumi, but I can get you nearby. Who’s going first?”

“Not XANA,” numerous voices chorused instantly.

He scoffed. “I’m the Guardian of the First City. I can shape it to my will, and so can the other me. Without my protection, the other XANA will have you completely at his mercy. You need me to go in first.”

“I’ll take my chances,” William spat, marching towards the scanner. Sissi held her breath as the doors closed around him. There wasn’t smoke or flashing lights or anything.

“Transfer, William… Scanner, William…”

Well, except that. She leaned in to Odd, who was standing nearby. “Does it hurt?” Sissi asked quietly.

“Huh? Oh, the virtualization? Nah, unless you’re stupid like we were the first few times, and try going in right after devirtualization. Then it hurts like a bitch!”

“Virtualization.”

The doors opened. And--William was gone. She glanced anxiously at the screen to see a third green dot. Mr. Belpois leaned back. “A perfect transfer.”

Sissi exhaled slowly.

XANA shoved his way into the scanner, going second before anyone could stop him. “Idiots,” Sissi heard him mutter. It was so weird to hear that in Aelita’s voice, see the scowl on her face.

“Transfer…” Mr. Belpois’s mouth moved wordlessly, uncertainly, for a moment. “Aelita? Scanner, Aelita… Virtualization.”

The doors opened. Empty again. Sissi’s heart pounded erratically. She craned her neck. There was now a fourth dot on the screen, but...shouldn’t there be two? One for XANA, one for Aelita? “Is
she okay? I mean--XANA’s possessing her. What if that messed something up?"

Mr. Belpois tapped a few keys. “Aelita? Are you alright?”

“She is,” Aelita’s voice said. “So am I, thank you for asking.”

“Why are you still possessing her?”

“If you’d waited a couple of moments, I wouldn’t be. I just landed.”

Odd rolled his shoulders as he strolled up for his turn. “Well, I can’t let XANA be the only sarcastic asshole in that city. There’s only one man for that, and his name is Odd! Della! Ro--”

“Wait!”

Everyone looked at her.

She mustered up every bit of her courage. “I want to go next.”

“You?” Odd said in disbelief. “You were terrified of the scanner the first time you saw it!”

“Yeah, well, that was then, this is now.” Not that she could remember discovering the supercomputer. “I want to help, and this is the only way I can.”

Professor Hertz was shaking her head, though her tone wasn’t unkind. “Sissi, I understand that, but your friends have experience on Lyoko. You don’t, and you won’t have time to gain it.”

“Well, you need all hands on deck, and it’s not like you have teenagers lining up outside.” She refused to be useless. She looked at Fox pleadingly. “Besides, I can improv!”

The agent pursed his lips in contemplation. “Last time we left the kids behind,” he said slowly, “they followed us anyway. I say we let her help. She won’t really be in danger, and if she gets devirtualized, she’ll just come out here.”

Apprehension and relief twined through Sissi in equal measures. “Thank you!”

Professor Hertz nodded, though she still looked unhappy. “Be careful,” she told Sissi. “And listen to your comrades. A soldier’s squadmates make up for her own deficiencies, and she makes up for theirs.”

Sissi was tempted to make a witty comment, but it died before it reached her lips. She didn’t want to test their magni...magnanimi...good-will.

Stepping away from the scanner, Odd gave Sissi a bow, arm extended. It was joking, but she thought there might be some genuine respect in it. “All yours.”

Sissi walked up to the scanner and peered inside. It was smooth, metallic, ordinary. She swallowed and crossed the threshold. The doors closed behind her.

“Scanner, Sissi…”

She squeaked as intense air pressure blew from below, lifting her into the air. She wanted to flail her arms, but some sixth sense made her hold still. The inside of the scanner began to brighten.

“Transfer, Sissi…”
The light was too strong; she squeezed her eyes shut. And where was that wind coming from? Her hair was flying like a ribbon.

“Virtualization!”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I know Evolution says they can’t be virtualized until 12 hours have passed since their last trip, but that contradicts the show at a few points (notably “Common Interest”). Since I’m ignoring Evolution anyway, that retcon has been...well, retconned. Instead, I made a distinction between being devirtualized (where their life points are reduced to zero, which could be construed as a system suddenly being shut down) and rematerialized (where they’re just pulled out, which would be analogous to the ‘safe’ shut down process). Going back in too soon after being devirtualized poses risks, while dematerialization poses no such problems.
A/N: Sorry for the longer wait; I got an internship at a law firm at the end of January, so that’s been keeping me real busy. It might end up being the norm, though I won’t stop working on the fic! I hope everyone's staying healthy with the Corona virus going around!

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In his tent, Hannibal nursed his broken wrist with a glass of fine red wine and nostalgia. His silk jacket was crumpled on the floor, the hat that hid his emerging bald spot abandoned beside it. Melancholy was unusual for him, introspection an antithesis. And yet, robbed of all his usual activities, he found his mind returning to the well-worn pathways of memory.

When the men in black had learned of Hopper’s planned treachery, Hannibal had been on the team sent to collect him and his family. It had thrilled him beyond words. He’d already been plotting to spirit away the man and his work for himself; to be handed the opportunity was golden.

For what he’d had to throw together on short notice, his plan had been grand. Hannibal smiled remembering it. That job was when he’d first hired Grigory; the man’s performance had made him decide to change their contract into full-time. Hannibal had been assigned to neutralize Anthea; instead, while they were en route, he’d had Grigory get to the house and kidnap her. The timing had been essential—too much, and Hopper or his daughter would discover her absence and flee. Too little, and Grigory wouldn’t have time to escape before the men in black got there.

He’d pulled it off beautifully.

While the rest of his squad were wrestling with Hopper and the screaming four-year-old, Mago had slipped off to the master bedroom. Grigory was already gone, but there was a woman waiting. She, and those who were supposed to verify Anthea’s identity, had been heavily bribed. A sack over her head would fool the rest of the base. No one would know the real Anthea was gone until it was too late.

And no one had. Hannibal brought her in, sent Steinback an anonymous tip about what happened to Hopper (after all, what good was a hostage when her husband was locked up?), and slipped away. That was that.

Even now, Hannibal considered that plan to be his magnum opus. Anthea hadn’t just been valuable as a hostage, but a skilled programmer in her own right. Her help had been extracted slowly, painfully, dragged out by force and other methods of persuasion, but in the end she had assisted his rise to a criminal kingpin.

And look at him now. A slave to a mere program. His empire was going to fall. His enemies would all converge on him and devour his corpse. It had only taken one unforeseen circumstance to put him in this situation—who knew how many more were out there, and what dooms they’d bring?

Sighing, he threw back the rest of his glass and rose to refill it.
“There’s been an incident,” came the cool, feminine voice he utterly despised.

Startled and--he hated to admit it--embarrassed to be seen in this state, Hannibal put his glass down. He turned to see the thing staring at him. “An incident?” he repeated, trying to cover up his moment of weakness with a disdainful tone and a curl of his lip.

“The men in black attacked and took the Hermitage,” the thing said. “They’ve sent the Lyoko Warriors into the First City. I will deal with them. You will deal with the humans.”

_During a blizzard?_ Hannibal shook himself. If the men in black could do it, he could too. Still... “Why not just send her?” he challenged, jerking his chin to indicate XANA’s current form.

“This girl will be more useful to me in the First City.”

Hannibal drummed his fingers against his thigh, letting the pleasing clinking of his rings both soothe him and stimulate his mind. Even if XANA spoke the truth, why send Hannibal’s men at all? He knew XANA was capable of terrible things with the Carthage and the towers. It should easily be able to handle a group of mere humans. So why not just do so?

Memory stirred. What was it the thing said when it first took over? Something about prioritizing quantum energy?

Hannibal’s fingers stilled as a realization hit him:

*It’s been bluffing.*

Well, not really. It still held all his assets in its digital hands, and that girl was easily capable of killing him. But it wasn’t all-powerful. It had limited resources, a limited amount of energy it could expend for use in the real world. And most or all of that energy was tied up with the blizzard.

He didn’t let his epiphany show on his face. Instead, he cast his eyes down in mock-defeat and muttered, “Fine.”

But inside, his heart was racing.

He had thought, when the time to upload the materialization program came, he would have to sacrifice his entire army to buy time. Even he balked at the thought of losing that many resources. But if that girl was in the First City, and its energy was spent holding up the blizzard...

The thing disappeared. Hannibal put his hat back on, picked up his crumpled jacket, folded it, and went to grab a replacement. He ran his free hand over it, smoothing out any wrinkles. Then he checked his image in the floor-length mirror next to his bed. He smiled.

XANA wouldn’t be able to stop them when they uploaded the virus. All they were waiting on was for its completion.

---

*So if I modify the string here...and add zero to the list of variables for that string there...*

Jeremie chewed the inside of his lip and squinted at the screen. Part of him hoped one of his allotted five-minute bathroom breaks was coming up soon; his legs cramped terribly and a tension
headache throbbed in his skull. Another part of him hoped it would be a while before someone fetched him, because he was this close to fixing this run-time error and interruptions would break his concentration.

One of the first things he’d done when he’d begun this project was run a check on the anti-XANA program to confirm what had caused it to need so much energy. The answer, unfortunately, lay with the artificial intelligence. It was a more complicated version of the Marabounta—stronger, smarter, with any semblance of will or sentience smashed out and with a built-in self-destruct button so it wouldn’t linger once its job was done. It had seemed like a good idea at the time, but all the modifications had added up and, in the end, made it too taxing for the supercomputer to run without a drain elsewhere. And what could he drain? Defenses? As if. Towers? XANA would laugh at him from the safety of the Internet. The virtualization process? God, he didn’t want to think about what could happen to his friends if he tampered with that while they were still on Lyoko.

But soon enough, Jeremie had found his inspiration. Back in the war, he’d kept a copy of every program he’d ever designed on his laptop—you never knew if you might need it in another shape or form—and out of sheer habit, had never deleted them. The materialization program he’d created for Aelita was among them; he’d whooped in joy when he’d dug it out.

So now, days later, he was—hopeful—finalizing the process of crossing it with his anti-XANA program. He’d stripped away the artificial intelligence except the bare minimum necessary to ‘catch’ and infect XANA. His goal was to make it less of an independent program, but an extension of the virtualization system. If it could grab just one bit of XANA, he hoped, it would be able to reel the rest in and force him to be materialized.

At which point, Mago…

Cold sweat broke out on his forehead. Jeremie swallowed.

One time, for a class assignment, Professor Keningston had them read a portion of Crime and Punishment. It was during their last few months of fighting XANA, when Jeremie was so consumed with work that even attending school was a distasteful distraction. He’d done the assignment without really thinking about it. But now, all of a sudden, he could remember everything, stark as ink on snow:

The main character had murdered his landlady because she was exploiting her clients, and Professor Keningston had them participate in a class discussion on the ethics of it.

Now, class, he couldn't help imagining her saying, is it murder to shoot someone who has a gun trained on you?

No, professor. It’s self-defense.

Now imagine this scenario. Someone has a gun trained on Jeremie Belpois. He takes the gun away and incapacitates his attacker. Then another person shoots the first person. Jeremie knew this would happen.

Is that murder, and if so, has he helped commit it?

His laptop beeped. Jeremie jumped. He’d blindly held down the same button, and now an unneeded line of parentheses marred his code. With a sigh, he fixed the error.

He didn’t want these kinds of ethical questions weighing on him. They were uncomfortable and
distracting. And yet, it seemed that the more he tried to avoid thinking about what would actually happen after XANA was materialized, the more it insisted on his attention.

Even now, even as he tried to push the images back, they swam to the front of his mind. The blizzard would drop, but Mago would have the supercomputer and all its power. Any help Dido sent would be swatted away. Jeremie’s only chance of defeating the Green Phoenix was to fire up a Return to the Past--if it could go back more than a day or two.

If he could get a few moments alone with the supercomputer.

If Mago hadn’t found out about Return to the Past and implemented some kind of countermeasure.

If, if, if.

He groaned and rubbed his temples, where that persistent ache was. *Get a grip, Jeremie! Your friends are relying on you! Everyone is relying on you!*

Wrong thing to think. The anxiety flared up again, stronger than before, a rapid current that was sucking him under. For a heart-stopping moment, he felt as if he *was* in a river, flailing as water flooded his mouth…

The door banged open, bringing him back to reality. For just a moment, Jeremie was grateful for Grigory Nictopalous. At least his unpleasant presence forced Jeremie to pay attention to something other than what was buzzing in his head.

Then the man spoke. “The golden opportunity’s here, runt. The rest of your friends have moved into the First City. XANA’s focus has shifted over there, but we don’t know how long that’ll last. Is it ready?”

The gratitude disappeared. Panic replaced it. His mind was torn between two thoughts of *no, not yet! and everyone else is there? What happened? Are they alright?* “A-Almost,” he said, so shaken he stuttered. “I just need to smooth out a few--”

“It doesn’t matter if XANA comes out as a functional human,” Nictapolous interrupted, scowling. “It can be a drooling retard for all we care, as long as it’s here.”

“That’s what I’m *trying* to do,” Jeremie snapped back, pushing down the useless revulsion that rose up, “fix any errors involved in the ‘catch’ process. But since I can’t take the program out for a test drive, I have to go over it with a fine-toothed comb to make sure I don’t miss anything!”

Nictapolous made a disgusted noise. “Tch. Alright, runt, but remember this.”

He crouched. Jeremie resisted the urge to shrink away. The man’s eyes were utterly snake-like. “We have your friends’ lives in the palms of our hands, we know where your parents live, and we may not get another chance like this again. And if we miss it because of your slowness…”

Nictapolous let the sentence trail off. Jeremie didn’t dare breathe or even blink. Not until the hitman smirked at him, rose, and left. Only then did the boy genius turn back to his work, his shoulders hunched under the ever-mounting pressure and fear.

*Message received.*
Consciousness returned slowly, and Aelita wished it hadn’t. Her head felt like someone was taking a hammer to it. Her mouth and throat were dry and sore, the lingering taste of smoke too strong on her tongue. Her eyeballs throbbed as if she’d been squinting at a computer screen for too long.

She groaned softly, trying to remember where she was and how this happened. But it was hard to hear herself think, much less find specific information.

Voices pierced the haze around her. Arguing, angry voices. She felt like she should recognize them...

“...be awake by now?”

“She will. Any moment.”

“She’d better. If something happens to her because of you --”

“As if I’d ever let anything happen to Aelita.”

“Oh yeah, besides all the times you tried to kill her and kidnap her and--”

And just like that, her memories clicked into place. “Stop fighting,” she mumbled.

The voices ceased. Bodies shuffled. Grunting, Aelita forced her eyes open. Her vision swam. She held her breath, waiting for the blurs to clear. After a few seconds, four faces came into focus--wait, four?

“Princess!” Odd beamed. “Welcome back!”

“How do you feel?” William asked.

“A little dizzy, but...I’m fine. Is that you, Sissi?” The others stepped back to give her space as Aelita sat up. Her stomach protested at the movement, but not too violently.

She rubbed her eyes and looked again. Yes, that was Sissi. She was wearing a sky blue tunic, with dark blue leggings and long sleeves underneath. She had a white chestpiece, similar to Aelita’s, as well as white bracers and knee-high boots. Her black hair was tied into a high ponytail and a crown rested on her head.

Her friend shifted her weight from foot to foot, looking equally nervous and proud. “What, like I was gonna let you guys have all the fun without me again?”

XANA rolled his eyes. “Yes, because that’s what matters. You feeling left out of the ‘fun’.”

“At least I’m not going to attack us when this is all over,” Sissi shot back.

Aelita sucked in a pained breath. XANA glanced over. His haughty expression faded somewhat. For a heartbeat, it was like they were staring at each other from across a chasm.

But if he was going to say anything, it was cut off by the familiar crackle in Aelita’s ear. “Aelita! You’re awake! Are you alright?”

Sissi jumped about a mile. The moment broke. Aelita turned away. “Yes, J--Mr. Belpois,” she said, catching herself just in time.
God. Jeremie.

For whatever reason--maybe because she’d been awake for it--her memories of this possession were crystal clear. She could still smell the burned, dead technicians. Like cooked pork. Just thinking that made her want to throw up.

She could still recall the iron tang of her own blood. The adrenaline coursing through her veins, stronger than it had ever been. Moving so fast the ground seemed to disappear under her--their--feet.

She could remember the information that XANA and the men in black had curtly traded, as they moved to the secret room.

Jeremie had been kidnapped.

Was he ok, she wondered? Had the Green Phoenix hurt him? What if they’d taken him far away just like they’d taken Mommy? What if the last time they ever talked was when she’d said she was going to stay with XANA?

What must Jeremie think of her? He’d been kidnapped because of her. And what about all they’d gone through before this? How many times had he been put in danger? He’d been dragged into the mess of her life, and when they’d buried it, she’d dug it up and pushed him back in.

And then--and then!--she’d cozied up with his sworn enemy. Even now, even as fear and worry soured her mouth and choked her heart, a part of her still couldn’t stop hoping XANA would go back to the way he used to. It surely wasn’t wrong to not want to fight XANA again, but to miss him?

Jeremie would be disgusted. Ashamed. Furious. Hell, all of her friends would be, and rightly so.

What is wrong with me?

“...updated on the situation. I’ll guide them to a point en route to the castle, where you all can rendezvous.”

Word filtered through the veil of her self-hatred. Aelita blinked. The memory of their situation reasserted itself--this was no time to be emotional. She hastily tuned back into the conversation, just in time to catch William’s protest of “You’re leaving us with him?”

Mr. Belpois’s sigh was a burst of static. “Ulrich and Yumi don’t have anyone to guide them through the city. But I’ll keep an eye on your progress as well. If XANA steers you wrong, I’ll chime in.”

“I won’t,” XANA sneered. “It serves no purpose to undermine our shared mission.”

“You’ll understand if I reserve judgment.” And then Mr. Belpois was gone.

Aelita took a moment to look around. They’d been virtualized in a more congested area of the city, where buildings pressed up against each other, advertisements flashed in neon lights, and skyscrapers raced to see which could be the tallest. In the real world, this would have been overflowing with people, but here the streets were empty, giving the area an uncomfortably ghost-like feel.

Their group was taking shelter in the shadows under a bridge. Aelita crept out a few inches, slowly taking in the sight of her childhood hideout. Her heart clenched. From a distance, it seemed
unchanged--the roads winding through the sky, the spires standing proud--but a closer inspection revealed wear and tear. Over here, the road and sidewalk were overgrown with weeds. Over there, that sign had lost the glow of half its neon letters. Those windows were cracked and broken. These lampposts had rust crawling up their skeletons.

“I neglected it when I escaped the supercomputer,” XANA said, stepping up and following her gaze. “I’m remedying that now.”

What was that supposed to mean? That he was trying to consolidate his hold on this city? Honor the memories they’d once made in it? Or did it mean nothing at all? Why couldn’t she stop analyzing every little detail? Aelita sighed, suddenly tired of feelings and possibilities.

“How long was I out?” she asked.

“Not long. A few minutes at most.” XANA scanned the skies again, then turned to their party. “The Mantas haven’t found us...yet. We should get going; cover as much ground as we can.”

“And what about when they do find us?” William’s voice was naked with hostility. “Do you expect us to rely on you for protection?”

XANA closed his eyes. A startled yelp from behind Aelita turned her head. William was staring at his XANA-era zweihander, which was most certainly not there when she last looked. Odd, tilting his head like a cat, examined his arrow launcher before taking aim at the nearby pillar supporting the bridge. A single Laser Arrow flew out.

“I’m locked in a hacking war with the other me even as we speak, so I can’t lift the weapons restriction...but he can’t stop me from programming some pieces of myself into weapon form.”

William dropped the sword like it was a venomous snake. “I’m not wielding you, either.”

“So you won’t leave your protection to me, but you also won’t lift a weapon in your defense? Make up your mind.” Before her outraged friend could respond, XANA turned to Sissi. “What weapon do you think you’d be good with?”

She twirled the end of her ponytail around her fingers and shifted her weight from side to side. “Um…a baton?”

XANA pondered that for a moment before decisively saying, “I’ll do even better.”

Smoke swirled through Sissi’s fingers, shaping and solidifying into a baton. It was polished silver and had a button engraved with the Eye at the base. XANA pointed at it. “Press that.”

She did, and the baton extended into a full bo staff. “Whoa,” she breathed.

“Man, think of the mind games you can play with a weapon that changes length!” Odd exclaimed. “Then again most of XANA’s monsters are mind less …hey, why is that, anyway?”

“They’re simple, like those weapons. Unthinking, unfeeling, and easier to mass-produce.”

Aelita glanced at her still-empty hands and waited. When XANA didn’t ask what weapon she wanted, she spoke up. There was no way he would leave her defenseless, so… “You didn’t give me a weapon. Does that mean I’ll be able to use my powers here?”

XANA blinked in mild surprise. “Of course. Why wouldn’t you?”
“Well, William’s report said he couldn’t use Super Smoke…”

“Ah, that time he used the scanner in Brussels, correct? That was likely a byproduct of their second-rate virtualization. Powers have never been affected by the weapons restriction; one of Hopper’s rare oversights.”

Sissi, who had been listening closely, asked, “Powers?”

Odd perked up. “Everyone’s got one or two on Lyoko, and they’re all unique! Well, except for me, Einstein programmed it out. But I never needed powers to be awesome anyway! Aelita here can shape the landscape of Lyoko and throw these things called Energy Fields. Ulrich can Triplicate--make two clones of himself--and Super Sprint--which does what you think it does. Yumi has telekinetics.”

The other girl turned to William. “And yours is…Super Smoke?”

“Technically, it’s one of mine,” XANA said. “I reconstructed his avatar when I possessed him.”

Sissi looked at her hands. “So… I probably have a power too? How do I know what it is?”

Aelita grimaced. “Well--you won’t be able to know until you do use it. I’m sorry, I know that’s frustrating.”

“And how do I do that?”

“Reach inside yourself,” William told her. “Just try and feel it, and pull it out.”

Sissi scrunched up her nose in concentration. They waited, but after a few moments, she shook her head. “I can’t… I mean, I know it’s there, but I can’t get it to work.”

“Maybe it’s like mine was,” Odd suggested. “Uncontrollable.”

XANA scowled at that. “Yes, because that’s just what we need. An untested newcomer with an unknown power she can’t control.”

Aelita opened her mouth, and noticed William doing the same, but Sissi beat them to the punch. “Oh, don’t worry,” she said, sweet as sugar, “if I accidentally fire lasers from my eyes or something, I’ll aim at you.”

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“No…” Yumi breathed.

Ulrich would have said the same, had he not been at a loss for words. Just now, the pair of them had heard a voice over the mic--but not the voice they’d expected. And the things Mr. Belpois had said...

*Jeremie’s been kidnapped? XANA put up a blizzard? The men in black are fighting the Green Phoenix for the Hermitage? We’re working with XANA to defeat XANA?* Ulrich felt like his head was spinning; he scarcely had any idea of what to focus on first.

Yumi, however, narrowed in on one particular point. “XANA can’t be trusted.”
“None of us trust him, Yumi--” Mr. Belpois began.

“Aelita seems to! How could she?”

“--but working with him is our only choice. XANA has complete control over the First City. If the other XANA wills it, he can trap you in a loop of endless roads. You need this XANA with you to counteract that.”

Yumi’s lips were a thin white line. Her clenched fists trembled at her side. Ulrich knew she was practical enough to see the sense in a temporary alliance with XANA--but also that she had a special kind of hatred for him. Unlike the rest of the Lyoko Warriors, her family lived in Paris, where they were frequently--and unbeknownst to them--endangered by XANA’s attacks.

He couldn’t begin to imagine the terror Yumi must have felt.

As Ulrich mulled over what to say to her, a new voice came over the mic: “Michel, move over --let me--thank you! Yumi? Can you hear me?”

She inhaled sharply. “...Dad.”

“Yumi, honey, oh thank goodness you’re alright! I’ve been so worried--”

“Dad--I’m fine. I’ve done this a lot of times. But I--I’m glad to hear from you. What about Mom? Is she there too?”

Mr. Ishiyama’s voice became choked. “Yumi…”

Ulrich shifted, feeling awkward, wishing he could duck out. This was clearly supposed to be a private conversation. But he couldn’t turn off the mic. Fleetingly, he wondered whether Walter would-- no, of course he won’t. Don’t be ridiculous. And stop caring!

To give father and daughter some semblance of privacy, Ulrich turned away, pretending to study his tire iron and golf club. His mind, inadvertently, returned to recent revelations.

We’ll get you out of this, Jeremie, he vowed privately, though he had no idea how. And as for XANA...

Ulrich grimaced. While he was hardly going to shake hands with the AI, he could still remember how XANA had protected Aelita, Odd, and Yumi when Jeremie’s Marabounta went rogue--when he, Ulrich, had been too busy sulking to protect them. That had left a strange feeling of...not indebtedness, really, but begrudging gratitude.

In short, if he had to team up with one of their enemies… better the devil you know.

“Ulrich?”

He looked up. Yumi was standing before him, eyes a little wet. “I’m done,” she said, swallowing. “Thank you for...you know.”

He smiled at her. “No problem.” Then Ulrich glanced up. “Mr. Belpois, what do you need us to do? How can we help?”

“I materialized Aelita’s group as close to the castle as I could. They’re heading northeast--if you two go straight north, there’s a point your paths should intersect. I’d like you to rendezvous with them.”
“The castle? Why there?”

“According to XANA, it’s like the waytowers on Lyoko. If you step into it, you can exit into any section of the First City.”

“Meaning we can head to the gate, and from there get Aelita to the activated tower!” Yumi exclaimed.

“Exactly. The only problem--besides XANA, that is--is Carthage. While it’s at the heart of the castle, we can’t say for certain that its presence hasn’t had ramifications on the rest. So be cautious.”

A chill ran up Ulrich’s spine. Carthage had infected XANA--didn’t that mean, in some way, it was similar to him? Or was it the other way around…? “We will,” he promised. Yumi echoed him.

“Good. Now...there are still a few Mantas in your area, but most of them are swinging away. Looks like they’re searching for the main group. I think now’s your best chance to sneak out.”

Nodding, the two teens scooped up their weapons--the tire iron and golf club for Ulrich, the knives and 2x4 for Yumi--and carefully made their way to the warehouse entrance. Ulrich eyed the Ants with trepidation, but they kept going about their business, not even reacting when Yumi almost stepped on one.

They stepped out of the warehouse and into the street. Ulrich looked up and immediately noticed that Mr. Belpois was right. The Mantas that had been keeping an eye on them were gone. That doesn’t mean there aren’t more around, though.

“What do you think?” he asked Yumi. “Flying or running?”

She pursed her lips, evidently turning the viability of both in her head. “Flying,” she finally said. “We’ll have less cover, but we’ll travel faster. Mr. Belpois can tell us if any Mantas are in the area.”

Ulrich nodded, and the two took to the air.

---

Adventure wasn’t what Sissi expected.

Then again, she wasn’t sure what she had expected. Lots of action, drama, and death-defying moments had colored William and Odds’ accounts, but all that was absent right now. Instead, the air was tense as they slipped through the city, darting from cover to cover. No one spoke. Occasionally, the buildings or street would ripple or shift, but XANA would glance at them and they would settle down.

Thanks to XANA, they’d traveled unmolested for the past...however many minutes, she had no idea how to tell time here. But, looking up, she could see more and more of those flying things--Mantas, right?--crossing the sky. It was only a matter of time before they found them, and then…

She swallowed. Her mouth felt very dry.
You can do this, she told herself. It’s just the fate of the world. No biggie.

They followed XANA as he ducked into a restaurant, left through the back exit, and stepped into a subway station. After travelling underground for an indeterminate amount of time, they emerged back into the city. Sissi paused in the exit-slash-entrance; the red glow that had been on the horizon was much larger now.

That was all she had time to think before a strange, high-pitched sound reached her ears. XANA and Aelita moved in a blur, and suddenly two barriers—one red, one pink—curved over the group’s heads, meeting in the middle to create a gradient dome. It rippled strangely, like stones had been thrown into it.

“Nice job, HAL-9000,” Odd mocked. “You led us right into an ambush! Or was that your plan all along?”

Aelita started to say, “Odd, he wouldn’t—”

And at the same time, XANA retorted, “If I wanted to get rid of you, I could just let the City do it.”

Then Sissi saw the group of eight Mantas overhead and, like an idiot, thought oh, we’ve been attacked. William, who had been last in line, stepped out from behind her. He frowned at the sight that greeted him. “That’s not good.”

“They’re coming back,” Aelita fretted, watching as the Mantas did, indeed, circle around. “I know my barrier can hold up against another round...XANA?”

He was studying the dome, visibly calculating. “Mine can too, but not forever. Hiding only gives reinforcements time to arrive. After the next attack, we should drop the dome and go on the offensive.”

Odd flexed his claws. “Now you’re speaking my language!”

William leaned in towards Sissi. “Stay close to me.”

Ordinarily, Sissi might have snarked something about damsels in distress, but right now her heart was trying to pump its way out of her chest. Nausea, fear and uncertainty fought for dominance. So all she did was nod and tighten her grip around her baton-staff.

The Mantas faltered when they passed over XANA and Aelita, as if uncertain, but only for a moment. In the next instance, the dome was shaking and trembling under a barrage of laser fire. Sissi tensed, but after several nail-biting seconds of this, the assault stopped. The dome still held.

“Now!” Aelita said as the Mantas wheeled away. The barrier dropped—she and XANA threw Energy Fields—Odd fired Laser Arrows—William threw some kind of sword beam—four of the Mantas writhed in the air—

The ones Aelita, XANA, and William hit exploded.

And then chaos erupted. The rest of the pack turned on a dime and dove for them. XANA disappeared into smoke and peeled off to the left, while Aelita activated a pair of pink wings and flew right. Sissi tried, she really did, to stay near William, but in all the confusion she lost sight of him, and Odd too. In what seemed like an instant, she was alone.

Her heart worked double-time as she darted through the battlefield like a rabbit fleeing a fox. Red lasers and strange white objects fall from the sky—she didn’t know what the latter were, but some
instinct told her to avoid them. She skirted a field of them and almost got hit by a laser, only just leaning back in time. Forget fighting back--it felt like it took everything she had just to stay alive!

A shadow fell over her. She looked up into the blank face of a Manta as it dove down. Its tail swung down, red light gathering at the tip. Sissi yelped and jumped to the side--not a second too soon! A laser slammed into the ground. She looked around frantically--where was everyone?!

_In the time it took Sissi to fumble into some kind of fighting stance, another Manta joined its friend. She gulped, watching them swing around and fly back to her. “Hey, power? If you wanna do something, now’d be a good time.”_

Nothing happened. Typical.

The Mantas fired, and somehow Sissi managed to block them both with her weapon. For a heartbeat, she felt proud--and then they kept firing, circling in the air so that she had to rotate to keep up with the lasers. Panic started to set in. _I can’t keep this up forever!_

But then, smoke flew by her. When it passed the Mantas, it turned back into William, who yelled as he brought that big-ass sword down. It sliced right through one of the Manta’s heads, and the creature exploded. Its friend turned tail and ran.

William didn’t chase it right away, hovering in the air as he glanced down at her. “Sorry I’m late. Reinforcements did, in fact, show up--right on top of me and Odd.”

She felt ashamed of her unkind thoughts earlier. It wasn’t William’s _job_ to bodyguard her, and she should be capable of taking care of herself. “How do I get up there?” she yelled.

He looked amused. “We can fly here.”

Oh. Right.

Face burning, she jumped straight up--and yep, this was flying. And...this was how you hovered, okay. Okay!

William pointed after the fleeing Manta. “You wanna handle that one? I’ll make sure nothing else interferes.”

Determined to prove herself, Sissi nodded. They flew off in pursuit; flying was strange, but in a few moments she felt she had the hang of it. She even dared to grin--it was kinda fun!

Realizing it was in trouble, the Manta dropped some of the white things. “Bombs!” William called.

_She knew they weren’t good!_ Sissi angled her body, diving under the small minefield. William simply turned into smoke and flew through it. The Manta was forced to dive as well to avoid him--right into Sissi’s path.

_She swerved in time to avoid crashing. The Manta keened, maybe in surprise. Recovering quickly, Sissi grabbed its tail, swung on it like a rope, let go at the apex, and did a backwards somersault to land on top of it. She stumbled._

_The stupid thing immediately tried to barrel roll, and Sissi barely managed to grab its wings in time to avoid falling off. Irritation spiked. “I am so done with you!”_ she spat, and in a burst of daring she didn’t know she had, let go with one of her hands--the one with her weapon. She brought down the baton-staff on its head once--twice--a third time!--
And the Manta exploded.

Sissi fell through the air for a few heart-stopping seconds before she figured out how to spin to a halt. She hovered there, grinning, bursting with pride. “I got one!”

“Nice, kid!” Odd yelled as he chased a Manta, firing bursts of Laser Arrows into its back. With a low crooning sound, his opponent burst into pieces. “But don’t get cocky!”

*Kid?! We’re the same age!*

“Nice job.”

She turned and saw William hovering nearby. He was smiling at her, and Sissi felt a little glow inside. She smiled back. “Thanks.”

In the lull, she looked around. Aelita was weaving through the air, throwing pink energy blasts. She hit two Mantas, who immediately exploded. Another Manta came up behind Aelita, but before Sissi or William could do or say anything, a smoke trail coiled underneath it. XANA shifted back, raised a red scimitar, stuck it into the Manta’s belly, and dragged it all the way down the underside of its body. Sissi shuddered. The Manta screamed and died.

Aelita glanced back. “Thanks!”

Sissi looked around for more Mantas, but the skies were empty. Everyone was flying towards her and William, grouping up. She tightened her grip around her weapon, disbelieving. *It’s over? It didn’t feel like it was over.* Adrenaline was still pumping through her veins; her vision felt extra sharp; her heart--

She jumped as Odd slapped her on the shoulder. “Still alive, huh? Not bad! We’ll make a Lyoko Warrior out of you yet!”

For some reason, Aelita frowned at that. Sissi swallowed. *Maybe she thinks I’m not cut out for it.*

“Well that’s not in question. I mean, they somehow made one out of you.” She said instead, not wanting to let any of her doubts show.

William laughed. Aelita ducked her head to hide a smile. Even XANA snickered. Odd shot the last one a glare--Sissi couldn’t tell what parts, if any, were mocking or genuine. “Hey, I don’t need to put up with this from you of all people!”

Sissi barked out a laugh, a tad hysterically. She couldn’t help it. Everything had been so *intense* the past few days and they’d just been in battle and she could have *died* --not really but *still* --and this was...this was normal. A *relief.*

Odd threw his hands in the air, but he was smiling. The last of Sissi’s post-battle stress melted away as the five of them chuckled together. For just a moment, there was camaraderie.

But when the laughter faded, they all remembered who they were with and what they were there for. Guilt panged Sissi for having fun at this time; she glanced down. William slammed his mouth shut, looking quietly furious at himself. Odd’s jovial expression lessened, *hardened*. Aelita’s face fell.

XANA’s became closed off. “The rendezvous point isn’t too far. We should hurry; now that they’ve found us once, the attacks are only going to increase.”
Act IV Chapter VI: Riposte

Chapter Notes

A/N: ahahaha I hate writing battles ;_;

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hannibal drummed his fingers against his hip as he gazed, fixated, at the screen of Lyoko. The various colorful dots swarming around reminded him of the occasional military strategy games he’d partaken in. He and other soldiers would watch simulations of battle play out on a screen, with little markers much like this, and try to make tactical decisions based on weather, terrain, supplies… Even now, it was still a good mental exercise, and a welcome boredom-killer as he waited to see which way the pendulum of the battle between XANA and the kids swung.

His phone buzzed. He glanced at it. In position. Orders?

He typed back, Hold until I give the word.

Hannibal pocketed it and returned his attention to the screen. Now that Grigory and his men were ready, all they needed were the program and Aelita Schaeffer. One, he could rematerialize at any time. The other...

Alas, he had no way of making the boy work faster. So all he could do was wait and imagine the various punishments he would enact should Jeremie fail to deliver the program on time. Ideally, the kids would defeat that girl XANA sent in. But if they didn’t, he would need Jeremie on hand to materialize XANA instantly, while its attention was still pointed away from Hannibal.

He didn’t know when he’d get another chance, and he was not waiting another fifteen years just to claim what was his by right.

---

It didn’t take long to meet up with Ulrich and Yumi. The frosty glare Yumi threw XANA, then her, made Aelita feel as if she were trapped in a small room, walls closing in around her. Justifying her complicated feelings to herself had been easier when it was just her and XANA trapped in the Mirror. But with anger rolling off her friends in waves, and XANA’s blase attitude, and this whole situation...

Her half-hearted hope that maybe there could be a peaceful resolution seemed both far away and foolish.

But whatever grievances Yumi had, there was no time to air them. The instant the two groups reunited, there was another attack. With their numbers, it was easily dealt with, but Mr. Belpois reported more Mantas closing in on their position, so they’d quickly hurried away.

As they moved through the city, there were more and more attacks--attacks with fewer numbers
but greater frequency, so that it seemed as if they could barely go a block before another one came. And this, perhaps, was better at slowing their progress than low quantity, but high quality, attacks.

But then, suddenly, unexpectedly, the attacks stopped.

“It’s quiet,” Yumi murmured, eyes tracing the empty sky.

Aelita craned her neck. They’d been flying along an airborne ruby road for maybe twenty or thirty minutes now. They were in the thick of the downtown now, surrounded by skyscrapers and towering office buildings. The castle was just ahead, maybe only a kilometer away now. It sat at the crest of a hill; at the base of the hill, the buildings suddenly stopped, as if someone had taken a knife and cleanly cut them away.

“Maybe too quiet?”

“Odd, don’t be an idiot,” Sissi said.

“An idiot? Mademoiselle, I am a bona fide genius, just tragically misunderstood…”

“How do you humans get anything done?” XANA muttered. “You get distracted so easily.”

“What’s it say about you, then? You lost to us.” William snarked.

“Us? I don’t recall you being there.”

Rage twisted William’s face. “Oh, that does it--”

He drew his sword and charged. Alarmed, Aelita quickly pushed herself between them. To her relief, Ulrich moved to help, too, grabbing William’s arm and tugging him back. “Cool it. He’s just an asshole, don’t sink to his level.”

“And XANA, stop provoking--”

She’d turned to glare at him. That’s why she saw the red laser settle on his forehead.

Years of combat instinct set in. She tackled him. A loud crack split the air. They tumbled through the sky.

“Sniper!” Odd shouted, already dropping to the ground below. He rolled behind an abandoned car. Aelita untangled herself from XANA and followed her friend down. Scanning the area, she spotted a blue telephone booth. The two of them scurried behind it as another shot rang out. A quick glance around showed that none of her friends were still in the sky, though she couldn’t see them--she could only presume they’d also found cover. Okay, let’s just take a minute to--

And then Mantas swooped down from above. Oh, there’s the ambush.

“Eva,” XANA hissed. If he’d been surprised or scared or anything, she couldn’t tell now. His face was creased with annoyance and frustration.

Her heart raced as a pair of Mantas strafed by, firing. Trying to keep her head down, she summoned a pair of Energy Fields and used them to deflect the lasers--she searched for an opportunity to return fire, but the booth was too narrow for her to move and still be in cover, and that was limiting her options--

XANA, who had turned to Super Smoke, emerged, raised his hands, and shot smoke at the Mantas. It quickly engulfed and immobilized them, though still struggling to flap their wings or move their
tails. Sighing in gratitude, Aelita took aim with her Energy Fields and reduced them to dust.

The sniper rifle cracked again. A trash can not three meters away exploded. The drum-like staccato of her heartbeat was all Aelita could hear. Fear poisoned her mind. She and XANA had to press shoulder-to-shoulder to stay in their pathetic cover, there were Mantas above and a sniper hidden, and--and frantically, she threw up a barrier across the street, facing the direction she thought the bullet had come from.

The sniper fired again. Her barrier visibly cracked. Aelita’s jaw dropped. Then a red barrier rose behind hers, adding a second layer of protection. XANA stood up, staring in the direction of the sniper.

“Hey, you gonna help, or what?” Yumi snapped at him.

“One moment,” he said, distracted.

Aelita glanced in Yumi’s direction and saw her and Sissi pinned down behind a bench, struggling against a grand total of four Mantas. Quickly, she summoned an Energy Field and threw it at one. It missed, but the Manta had to swerve to dodge it, and that gave Yumi enough time to throw one of her fans into its head. The Manta exploded.

Behind Aelita, the pink barrier shattered. She glanced back at XANA. He was mouthing wordlessly to himself. Suddenly, his eyes gleamed predatorily, and a smirk crossed his features.

“Got it. I know where she is.”

“What? How?” Ulrich shouted from somewhere to their left. One of the Mantas nearby was cut in half by a sword beam, betraying that William was with him.

Hairline cracks spread along the red barrier.

“Simple math. I just calculated the angles of--” XANA shook his head. “Now’s not the time.”

A wisp of smoke spiralled from his finger. Taking the shape of an arrow, it spun north and pointed to an oddly spiraling skyscraper at the far end of the street. “She’s in there.”

“How are we supposed to get close to her?” Sissi shrieked, flinching as the rifle cracked again. There was the sound of breaking glass, and the red barrier was gone too. “We go out in the open, she’ll blow our heads off!”

“That’s not a problem for me,” William called. With clear reluctance, he added, “or XANA.”

“Oh, sure, that’s a good team.”

Odd’s words were light, but the truth behind them settled in Aelita’s stomach like a rock. I have to do something! She turned to XANA, who had quickly crouched when the barrier broke. “Please,” she begged. “Please don’t push him. Please just try to cooperate.”

He scowled. “I can be cooperative.”

“Not five minutes ago, you taunted him for getting possessed--by you! Why did you even do that?”

“He taunted me first,” XANA said, sounding petulant.

Part of her was tempted to shoot back, ‘He started it’? Are you four? Another part of her knew, intrinsically, that it was XANA’s gut reaction to fight back if he felt attacked or threatened. A third
part wanted to defend William, point out that XANA had possessed him for months and a little anger was justified. And a fourth part recognized, as the sniper rifle cracked again and she tucked her legs in a little closer, that now wasn’t really the time or place for this.

“XANA,” she said, and stopped because she couldn’t figure out how to say everything she wanted to. “Just--I’m not saying pretend to be sorry, but at least don’t rub it in his face.”

“XANA!” William snapped. “Are you coming, or what?”

He scowled, and Aelita almost screamed. “I’m coming!”

But, to her surprise and relief, he paused a moment, fixing her with a slightly softer look. “I’ll play nice.”

And with that, XANA melted away.

---

The world looked different in Super Smoke. Everything was monochrome, for starters, and there was this...quality. William didn’t quite know how to describe it. Like looking at your face through a fogged-up bathroom mirror, he guessed. Stuff blurred around the edges and just felt a little less real.

They raced through the street, swift and soundless. Occasionally the shadow of a Manta fell over them, but any laser fire that came near them was accidental. Not that it would do much good even if they were hit.

“This one.” XANA said. “Floor sixteen.”

And yeah, turns out he could talk while in Super Smoke. Not that he’d ever had reason to...before.

William turned his--eyes? He didn’t have eyes right now--gaze up towards the building XANA had stopped in front of. It was one of those spiralling skyscrapers, made of glass and a smooth blue-silver metal.

“We should split up,” William suggested stiffly. “One of us covers the window, one the door.”

The other smoke churned, in a way that brought to mind a curt nod. “Any preference?”

“Not really.”

“I’ll take the door, then.”

Wordlessly, they parted. Instantly, a weight seemed to drop off William’s shoulders. The air seemed easier to breathe. Just the sight of XANA made his stomach boil with black rage. Being around him forced William to exercise every ounce of self-control to keep a lid on his hate and fury.

And fear. There was fear mixed in, too. Fear that he would wake up in days, weeks, months, with no memory of what had happened in the ensuing time but still knowing XANA had puppeteered his body for evil.
How could Aelita stand to be in the same city as him?

Keeping close to the wall, William flew up the side of the building, counting under his breath. When he reached floor fifteen, he stopped. Now that he was closer, he could see the barrel of a sniper rifle extending from one of the windows. Even as he watched, it jerked and cracked. He hoped no one was hit.

He paused a moment to mentally play out how this was gonna go. He could just grab the rifle and yank it away—maybe pull Eva out of the window—no. They were trying to trap her. He needed to block the window himself, which meant shifting back, which meant exposing himself without knowing what, exactly, was in the room or what Eva had at her disposal. He didn’t want to rely on XANA, but letting him get there first and distract her might not be a bad idea.

Besides, he deserves to take the brunt of the risk.

“XANA’s almost there,” Mr. Belpois said, as if reading his mind. “Make your move in three...two...one!”

William didn’t waste time wondering if he meant after one or on one. He just acted. Dropped Super Smoke. Flew the last floor up. Dove through the open window--

Looked around--

XANA was standing in the doorway, one hand holding up an Energy Field, the other holding a red scimitar. Eva’s back was to William, but at the sound of his entrance, she spun. She was wearing tight red jeans and a zipped-up black jacket covered in red Eyes. Her arms cradled a sleek sniper rifle that looked like an FR F2 model, with a few changes—it had red TRON-esque lines running through the body, and most noticeably the stand was absent. He took all this in instantly, as well as the way her eyes darted to the window behind him.

Then XANA fired the Energy Field, and Eva moved. One minute she was there, the next she was in Super Smoke. William himself barely had time to twist out of the way of the blast, angry at XANA and angry at himself for not expecting that. Of course she’d have Super Smoke! “Hey, watch it!” he snapped at his “ally”.

XANA didn’t deign to answer. Eva was moving towards the window, and he raised a hand. A red barrier blocked her way. The smoke stirred, moving in place like it was considering—then it jolted straight up towards the ceiling. William flew up after her, swinging his claymore as she rematerialized--

She parried it with her sniper rifle.

He gritted his teeth, straining his muscles. Ordinarily, he should have been able to overpower her. But in their position, Eva was crouching on the ceiling, and he was pushing up against her. So, she was able to brace herself and push back down, while he was fighting against gravity without any footing. It was a deadlock in her favor—but if he could just maintain it, then XANA could--

She looked at William’s claymore and smiled. “Clever.”

Suddenly, the sniper rifle in her hands turned to smoke. With the opposing force gone, William awkwardly lurched forward-slash-up—but Eva had clearly been expecting it, for she neatly spun out of the way of his claymore. It struck the ceiling and stuck.

“Dunbar!” That was all the warning he got, but it was just barely enough. He let go of the sword and dropped. An Energy Field soared over his hair, ruffling his hair.
Flipping in midair, he twisted his head, searching for his opponent--there! She was using a desk as cover from XANA, staring up at William with an eerie smile. The smoke had split apart and was twisting around her wrists. Then, a second later, she was holding two hand pistols.

“Oh, that’s not fair,” William groused.

Eva fired in response.

She wasn’t the only one who could turn her weapon to smoke. With a quick mental thought, his blade melted down and reappeared in his hand. Swiftly, he deflected the lasers. The ricochet sent them into chairs and desks. Papers flew through the air. Furniture fell over with mighty crashes.

Behind Eva, a Super Smoke’d XANA was streaking around her desk. Eva aimed one of the pistols at the smoke and fired, jumping back as she did so. XANA swerved aside, aborting the attack. He re-emerged on the far end of the room, deflecting one last stray laser with his scimitar. For a heartbeat, the two sized each other up.

“You think my cast-off is any threat to me?” she asked coldly.


---

“I don’t hear the rifle anymore,” Odd shouted, tucking and rolling to dodge a laser. As he came out of it, he returned fire; the Manta shuddered and exploded. “Hey, Einstein Senior, did they get her?”

“Einstein Se--what? No, Eva’s still fighting them.”

“If she’s like William was, she’s probably ridiculously strong,” Yumi mused. With a flick of her wrist, her fans wheeled towards a Manta, striking it square in the head. As the fans boomeranged back to her, she added, “Two people might not be enough. This is probably our only chance to close the distance and send some backup.”

“Great minds think alike!” Odd threw a wink at her. She rolled her eyes and plucked her fans out of the air, mouth twitching. “Sissi, Yumi--you two go on ahead. Ulrich, Aelita and I can cover the rear.”

Sissi blinked. “Are you sure?” Not to sell herself short, but if Eva was some super-powered warrior, was she really the best choice to go fight her?

“From what we know of Eva, she’s a sniper. Close-range specialists like you and William will be at an advantage when she’s cornered,” Odd explained, poking his head out over cover and scanning the sky. “But you’re new, so you really shouldn’t go alone. I think Yumi’s skills would complement yours, and besides, I want Ulrich and Aelita to help me hold off the Mantas.”

*Odd has a brain?* Her jaw dropped. He laughed. “Hey, let’s just say that hours and hours of *Advance Wars*, in game and real-life, pay off.”

...On second thought, this wasn’t the most bizarre revelation she’d learned today, or even all week. “Roger that, Captain,” she said instead, with only a bit of sarcasm.
She made to move, but a shake of Yumi’s head gave her pause. Sissi glanced over—oh. She was watching the sky, waiting for an opening.

Sissi followed her gaze, tracing the flight paths of the Mantas above. She thought she saw a moment where they could have moved, but Yumi didn’t—“Now!”

_Oh, okay!_

Like they’d been fired from a rocket, they darted off the ground, into the air, and down the street. A pair of Mantas peeled after them. Immediately, Yumi spun in midair and sent her fans flying towards the creatures. One swerved in time; one did not. It shuddered when the fans cleaved into its head, but didn’t devirtualize. Brazenly, Sissi dove for the one that had dodged, smacking it with her baton-staff.

Clubbing it several times did the trick, and her opponent exploded. She looked around to see Yumi had already taken care of the injured one. She raised an eyebrow at Sissi. “Ready to go?”

“Oh, okay!”

Following Mr. Belpois’s instructions, they weaved through streets and buildings, ducked indoors and cut through alleys. No other Mantas pursued them, leaving Sissi’s mind unoccupied. Dangerously so; even in this situation, Sissi couldn’t help but be aware this was the first time she’d been alone with Yumi since...wow, since they’d gone looking for Kiwi. She wished she knew a way to dispel the awkwardness. Or was she the only one feeling it?

Either way, it was better than being alone with Ulrich. She understood why he’d been acting the way he did, when he’d asked for her help, but the shards of hurt were embedded deep, and--

_Ugh, what’s wrong with me? This is so not the time to be thinking about--_

There was a flash in the corner of her eye. Red shards of glass, flying from the twisted skyscraper. A comet of smoke shot out a heartbeat later and flew straight at them.

“That’s Eva! Look out!”

Mr. Belpois’s warning came too late. Suddenly, Eva was behind Yumi, an arm wrapped around her neck, a pistol pressed to her forehead.

Before anyone could do anything, she fired.

---

In the Hermitage, Takeho screamed and threw himself at the computer. “YUMI!”

“She’s fine,” Michel assured him, though he was shaken as well. Anyone would be, after watching a teenage girl get shot in the head. But this wasn’t just a teenage girl; this one of the first friends his son had ever made. If she wasn’t alright, if something had gone wrong...his throat closed around bile.

Suzanne touched Takeho’s shoulder lightly. A second later, the scanner opened, belching steam into the air. Takeho ran to it. Michel stood up from his chair and craned his neck. For a moment, he
thought it was empty, and his heart stopped--but then he saw Yumi, curled up on the floor. Relief flooded him, even as she pounded a fist against the scanner.

Takeho swept his daughter up into a hug, and Michel politely turned away.

---

Time slowed down for Sissi. Events seemed to occur choppyly, in short bursts, rather than all at once. Which was funny, really, because what just happened, happened in the blink of an eye.

_Yumi…?_

Eva whipped away from Yumi’s pixelating avatar.

Two more smoke trails shot out of the skyscraper behind her.

The blonde trained her other gun on Sissi.

On pure instinct, she threw herself to the side.

Eva fired.

Time resumed its normal speed. A red laser streaked out and grazed Sissi’s side. The force of it sent her spinning meters down and back. She gasped, but strangely there was no pain. Hitting a roof, however, knocked the air out of her. As Eva approached, raising her pistols, all the stunned girl could do was stare--

“SISSI!”

--and Eva melted into smoke just as William slammed his sword into the spot she’d been standing. The second smoke trail--XANA--rushed off in pursuit.

William held out a hand and helped her get to her feet. “Sissi, are you okay?”

“Yumi,” Sissi repeated. Her voice shook. Her body shook. Her mind couldn’t stop replaying Yumi’s head exploding. Pixels flying out of her skull like blood--

“She’s fine!” Mr. Belpois’s voice made her jump. “She’s right out here. But, Sissi, that shot took off half your life points!”

Right. Right. This was--a virtual reality-slash-video game. Yumi wasn’t _dead_. Being shot didn’t _hurt_ because it wasn’t _real_. She had to repeat that several times before her shaking stopped.

“Half? That barely touched her!”

“I know, but we don’t have time to complain. Get back to the others, Eva’s heading straight for them!!”

---
“Sir?”

He spun in the chair. Hera was stepping off the elevator, one hand lightly touching Jeremie’s shoulder. The boy’s face was downcast, and in his hand he held a flashdrive.

Excitement flooded Hannibal. “That’s it, then?”

“That’s it,” Jeremie confirmed, subdued. “I just need to plug it in and…”

“I’m not letting you near the supercomputer,” Hannibal interrupted. “Tell Hera how to do it.” She was scared enough of him not to try anything, whatever she might see or whatever else the supercomputer could do.

Jeremie sighed, but passed the flashdrive to Hera. Hannibal stood up and moved to let her have the chair. As she sat down, he gripped the back and leaned in. “Don’t screw this up, or you know what I’ll do,” he breathed in her ear. XANA had already protected her once; it was best to remind her of her place as soon as possible.

She swallowed. “I won’t, sir.”

---

It happened so fast, there was no time to react.

Odd had Ulrich fighting on the ground, leaping off walls and lampposts to strike at the Mantas—a concession for his vertigo—while he and Aelita covered the air. They were both agile and used to aerial combat, him from his Overboard, her from her wings, and had finally begun thinning the numbers of Mantas. While there were a lot of them, they were too big to fit into buildings, and the children had taken advantage of that, diving through windows and emerging out another.

And then, a smoke trail had made a sharp turn out of an alley, zoomed to Ulrich, turned into Eva, and shot him.

As his avatar fell apart, Odd glanced at the last of the Mantas—three or so—and seemed to make a snap decision. “Aelita, take care of them! I’ll engage Eva!”

Out of all of them, he’d had the best track record when fighting the possessed William, so she saw no problem agreeing. “Right! I’ll be back as soon as possible!”

Spinning on a dime, she summoned an Energy Field in each hand. There were two Mantas flying towards her, side by side, nary a centimeter between their wings. She shot forward, holding her hands out—the Mantas fired, but her Energy Fields deflected the shots. A few seconds before they would have been rammed with the Energy Fields, the Mantas split off.

Twisting in midair so that she was looking backwards, Aelita’s glance darted around. Where—there!

She fired, and then there was only one Manta left.

No—no, never mind, there wasn’t.
“Nice shot,” she complimented XANA, who was coiling out of Super Smoke. “Focus on Eva!” he shouted back. “If we let her get away, she’ll set up another sniper’s nest!”

They returned in time to see Eva immobilize Odd with smoke and slam him into a bus. The girl’s attention seemed completely focused on the fight. XANA Super Smoke’d. As silently as possible, Aelita dove, one hand curving back to throw an Energy Field.

Her shadow fell on the pair. Eva looked up, smiled, and swept her arm upwards. Aelita’s eyes widened, but it was too late--Odd was tossed right in the path of her Energy Field. It hit him dead-on and reduced him to pixels.

Aelita grimaced. Damn! Sorry, Odd!

Eva’s head snapped to the left, where XANA was coming out of Super Smoke, scimitar in motion. Incredibly, she managed to duck under it. Her foot lashed out, connecting with his knee. He stumbled--she spun a pistol and pressed it against his stomach--Aelita dove, heart racing--

He went back into Smoke. Scoffing, Eva jumped straight up--Aelita started--there was no time to--

The other girl tackled her head on, colliding mid-air. They wrestled; one of Eva’s arms was locked around her waist, pinning them together. This close, Aelita had no way of using her Energy Fields.

“Hang on! William and Sissi are on their way!”

An elbow struck her jaw; her fist connected with a shoulder; another arm wrapped around her shoulder. It felt like bars of iron were compressing her arms to her sides. She dared a glance down. XANA was floating in the air, a red Energy Field in his hand, a scowl on his face as he watched them struggle.

Eva was using her as a shield, Aelita realized. To cover her escape, she mentally added, suddenly aware that their struggling was propelling them backwards.

Her jaw clenched. Grit flooded her. Not if she had anything to say about it. She slammed her head forward against Eva’s. Starbursts of pain blossomed behind her eyelids. The grip on her loosened--

With a mighty heave, she broke the hold. Aelita kicked, using Eva as a springboard to propel herself backwards through the air. Immediately, an Energy Field flew towards the blonde. It caught her in the chest, sending her spinning further through the air.

Aelita sensed, rather than saw, XANA arrive at her shoulder. Eva, recovering, rubbed at the spot the Energy Field had hit. Red sparks were still crawling around the contact point. The maybe-friends raised Energy Fields.

William and Sissi arrived then, emerging out of an alley far below. Eva looked down at them, then up at XANA and Aelita. She’s going to run, Aelita realized, a split second before Eva melted into Super Smoke. As William and Sissi flew up, she dove down, streaking between them.

“Stop doing that!” Sissi screeched in frustration--

There was a blue flash--

And suddenly, Eva was human. She stumbled, her face openly shocked.

William wasted no time. He spun in the air, cutting through her midriff. Eva was still blinking,
dumbfounded, as her body blackened, hissed, and turned into red and black smoke. Aelita relaxed, recognizing the familiar signs of XANA’s brand of devirtualization.

“Is she gone?” Sissi asked hesitantly.

“Yes,” Aelita said, looking for a spot to land. Spotting a flat rooftop, she touched down on it, deactivated her wings—which she’d activated through sheer habit—and added, “When he was possessed, William would devirtualize that way, too.”

Her two friends landed on the roof and walked over to her. William wore the smile of a cat with the cream—Aelita couldn’t help smiling in return. “I don’t know what you did, Sissi, but thank you. You don’t know how satisfying that felt.”

XANA joined them, wearing an interested expression. “That was your power, wasn’t it? What happened, exactly?”

“I just...yelled, and I felt the power in me shift in response. And suddenly she was back to normal.” She looked between them. “But how did I…?”

“I can think of several possibilities, but the most probable one is that your power nullifies other powers.”

“It’s Nullify,” Mr. Belpois confirmed. “When she used it, it appeared on her ID card.”

XANA’s mouth twisted, as if he wasn’t sure whether to smirk or scowl. “That’s...interesting.”

“Not very useful against monsters,” William mused. “But it’ll be pretty wicked against…”

They all glanced at XANA. Even Aelita. Guilt appeared a second later, but she couldn’t help it. He seemed determined to pretend he hadn’t noticed. “Well, it certainly made the rest of our mission smooth sailing. The other me will be too stunned to--”

Suddenly, he stumbled, braced one hand against the roof door. One hand came up to his head. Aelita frowned. “XANA?”

He lowered the hand. “I’m fine. I just got dizz…”

His voice trailed off. Aelita gasped. Behind her, her friends echoed her shock with their own various exclamations.

A white glow was emanating from XANA’s body, growing stronger by the second. Blue-white lines circled around him. It was--it was exactly like her old Code: Earth. But that shouldn’t be possible! What’s--

XANA stared at his hand, openly, unusually, baffled. “Wait, what’s--”

He disappeared mid-sentence.

---
XANA could bend, twist, break, and manipulate most rules as he liked, but on Lyoko there were some that were ironclad. One of those was that a devirtualization always left one mentally and physically stunned—even if the avatar wasn’t really XANA’s. While he had no body, the backlash of Eva’s sudden devirtualization did leave his mind reeling.

That was the only excuse he could think of for why he wasn’t able to spot the incoming program until it was too late.

Intangible, invisible, spread throughout Lyoko, and dizzy, he started as he “felt” hooks sink into him. Incredulity surged through him, alongside—yes—fear. He remembered those hooks. He remembered how they’d ripped him apart, scattered him about the Digital Sea like so much flotsam. Once again, he struggled, but once again, he was helpless to fight them off.

He screamed wordlessly, enraged beyond all belief. How? HOW? How was this happening AGAIN?

But even as he flailed, he analyzed, searching for any way out, any weaknesses in the attacking program. And, he noticed, something about these hooks felt different. He couldn’t say what. Rather than tearing him apart, it felt like they were pulling him together? Including—

Oh no.

The force on him was a vacuum, compressing and pulling him in a single direction. And from that direction, he could sense the other him rapidly approaching, sucked along by that same force. He had no control, no way to move. His “head” knocked against the other XANA’s as they collided.

No! I don’t want to remember! I don’t want to feel!

The safe cracked open—

And then everything around him was engulfed in light.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: From what we can see of the ID cards, they don’t list powers, but they have to be on there somewhere, or Jeremie wouldn’t be able to remove/add them. Same for Aelita’s wings. My assumption is that you can scroll through the card.

I wanted Sissi to have something that was fairly balanced, and this was my favorite pick of the possible powers I considered. As William said, Nullify would completely cripple any avatars XANA sent at her, but it would also be completely useless against monsters. I also think something that isn’t flashy, but irreplaceable nonetheless, would fit Sissi’s development. She’s not the star, and that’s ok. She’s still a valuable friend and comrade.

And on that note, we’re nearing the end of the fic! Another six or so chapters, by reckoning.

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