

Victory in the End

by Samuel Shores, aka "The Plaid Phantom"

A strong wind blew the withered old man's draping cloak. He turned his eyes north. Clouds were settling on Mount Fuji; a storm was brewing.

Better hurry. He thought. *The storm is coming fast.* He turned to a young woman following him. Her black kimono fluttered as she stood expressionless.

"We'd best make it back before nightfall, Yumi. The storm will be here by then."

She simply nodded. She looked up at the sky. There was something else, and it troubled her. Calls from the old man snapped her out of her trance, and she hurried to catch up to him.

"...And with that, Ulrich Stern finishes off the season with a record 62 goals this season. Back to you, Lynn."

"Thanks, Ted. In other news this evening..."

Ulrich shut off the television. "The way they're going on, you'd think we'd actually won the Cup." He glanced over at his friend Odd, who was eyeing his glass closely. "You going to drink it, or stare it to death?"

Odd took a sip of it and set it down. "Meh, It's not bad. Doesn't compare with good French wines, though."

"Really? I thought it was pretty good. Best the hotel has."

"You've been away from France too much. Forgotten the taste of good wine. Not that I've been having all that much lately, either."

Ulrich chuckled, and moved across the suite toward Odd. "Oh? Starving for your art and all that? I never thought you the type to starve for much of anything."

Odd glared at him, "Har, har. Things have actually been going okay lately; been getting some good gigs. I've actually been getting pretty close to one band. They're needing a good tenor sax."

Ulrich smiled. "Better tell them to keep looking then." Odd tried to counter, but was interrupted by Ulrich, who changed the subject. "I assume you didn't come all the way here just to tell me that."

Odd suddenly put on a serious face, and motioned Ulrich to take a seat, who sat down on a nearby sofa. Odd leaned forward, his long, grown-out blond hair came over his face, and he stared at Ulrich.

"*He* is back."

"You mean..."

"X.A.N.A."

Ulrich locked his gaze with Odd. "That's not something to joke about. We defeated him. We turned him off. We *killed* him."

"I'm not joking. We *thought* we killed him. We were wrong."

Ulrich fell backwards into the sofa's cushions. It had been nearly fifteen years since the factory, Lyoko, and X.A.N.A. Fifteen years in which to remember, and forget.

Memories rushed by in Ulrich's mind, and he closed his eyes. Feelings and emotions he hadn't felt in a long time battled in his mind. After a long while, he opened his eyes and brought them back level with Odd, who sat quietly.

"How?"

Odd started slightly. "What?"

"How did he come back?"

Now it was Odd's turn to lean back. Reclining in his chair, he said, "Everyone thought he was dead. Jeremie had been working on understanding the entire 'Lyoko complex', or whatever he called it. He even called our old friend Herb in to help him. Jeremie eventually made it to the core, where we had apparently only locked up X.A.N.A. He took precautions so that he wouldn't activate whatever might have been left of X.A.N.A., but something went wrong. I don't know what. I wasn't involved at this point. They called me in to help fight him off until they could fix it."

Ulrich nodded. "I'd been feeling some strong *déjà vu* recently. I guess that would explain it."

"Apparently. The time travel effects seem to weaken after discontinued use. Anyway, the attacks are getting stronger, and we need your help. Since your season has ended—"

"When can we leave?" Ulrich interrupted.

"I have tickets for tomorrow morning, if that's not too soon for you."

"If that's as fast as it can be, then." Ulrich paused a moment, then relaxed. "Well, in that case, would you care for more of this 'inferior' wine?"

Odd grinned mischievously. "*Merci.*"

Dozens of computer monitors hummed in a large room full of computing equipment. Dripping pipes along the walls betrayed the factory that housed the equipment. Suddenly a power surge dimmed the fluorescent lighting, and the monitors flickered slightly. Beth Delmas walked into the room just in time to see a large elevator door open and clouds of smoke billowed out, along with a very furious Jeremie.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid!" he yelled. "I should have known that it couldn't have handled that power. I am an *idiot!*"

"Jeremie! Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. It's scanner number three you need to worry about. Blew half the scanning ring's circuits. It'll take me a few hours to fix."

"Should I send Herb down with you?"

"No, I'll take care of it. Herb needs to keep an eye on Lyoko for Aelita."

"Hey, I can look at a computer monitor as well as he can. You need him down there. He knows nearly as much as you about that hardware."

Jeremie turned slightly towards her, and smiled at her, peering around his glasses. "Okay, send him on down. But the *moment* trouble appears you let us know."

"I know."

Jeremie turned around and headed back to the elevator. As he opened it's door to let out some of the smoke before he got in, he spoke over his shoulder, "Oh, and Sissi, make sure the vents are on down there. I'd rather not die of smoke inhalation."

"Okay," She paused as she realized what Jeremie had said. "Wait a minute... DON'T —" The door on the elevator closed before she could finish. "...call me Sissi." She

frowned and stomped off towards some stairs on the other side of the computers. Years earlier, she'd grown sick of being called "Sissi" and demanded that people called her Elizabeth, or, more often, just Beth. As she approached the stairs, a door on the far side of the factory opened, sending luminous rays of sunlight into the room. Beth ran toward the door, trying to see who had come. Recognizing Odd's long hair, she smiled and ran over to him and his companion.

"Well, Odd it's about time you showed up. We were starting to wonder," she told him, light-heartedly scolding him.

Odd smiled. "Oh, yes ma'am. I shall be sure to perform better for you in the future," he chimed, adding a mock bow for effect.

Beth peered around Odd to the figure behind him wearing a nice leather jacket. "You mean to tell me that's Ulrich? Wow. You look so much taller on television."

Ulrich smiled slightly. "I get that a lot. And how are you, Sissi?"

Beth frowned at him. "Not Sissi. I can't stand Sissi. Call me Beth."

"Beth? Okay, if you say so." He looked her over. "So...don't take this the wrong way, but what are you doing here?"

She only smiled. "Those two circuit-brains couldn't keep organized if their lives depended on it. Herb finally gave in and said I could help."

"I see." Ulrich looked at the makeshift lab setups and computer equipment strewn about the concrete floor. "Well, Jeremie's definitely been here."

Beth nodded, "He's downstairs doing some repairs. He had the scanners in pieces when this whole thing started. We've been scrambling to get them working again." Beth pointed at the elevator just as it opened to expel even more smoke and an entirely displeased Jeremie.

"Beth, why aren't the vents down there wor—oh, hello, Ulrich. Glad you could make it." Jeremie clasped Ulrich's hand for a moment, and motioned towards the stairs. "We should probably head upstairs and fill you in."

Ulrich looked at all of the equipment and wires connecting it all. "Upstairs? You've definitely been busy."

"The control room is in rough shape right now, so I put up some makeshift controls upstairs until we can clean everything up." Jeremie looked over everyone for a moment. "Well, let's go."

Herb frowned at the tactical data running down the screens surrounding him. He turned to a panel showing status indicators for Aelita. Frowning, he grabbed his headset and turned it on. "You sure there's nothing in the forest?"

Aelita sighed, "Yes Herb. It's completely empty. Not a thing in sight. Except trees. Lots of trees."

"Okay." Herb shrugged. "I guess it's back to the polar region then?"

Aelita groaned. "I suppose so. And this time, keep an eye out for weak ice. I'd rather not fall forever into oblivion."

"Hey, that was as much your fault as mine. You're the one who's lived there for who-knows-how-long."

"Well, excuse me for spending fifteen years in the real world."

"Let's just go."

As Herb was resetting his monitors for the next region, Jeremie entered with everyone

else in tow. He crossed the room to look over Herb's shoulder. "Any luck?" he asked.

"Not a thing. It's quieter than a tomb."

Jeremie looked down at him. "Interestingly put. Anyway, if there's nothing going on, you two aren't going to be doing much good. Also, Ulrich's here, so we should all probably get together for a meeting." He went over to a terminal and started typing. "Aelita?"

"Yes, dear?" she responded, with just a hint of anticipation.

"You can come on back now." Aelita let out a small cheer. "Let's have a meeting. Oh, and be careful; there's still a lot of smoke in the scanner room."

"Smoke? What on Earth did you do?"

Jeremie smiled. "What on Earth indeed. It's a long story. Suffice it to say that scanner three will be out for a while."

"Oh, *really*," Aelita said with a hint of amused suspicion. "Alright, I'll be there in a bit."

A few minutes later, nearly everyone was seated in a small meeting room. Marker boards covered in cryptic equations covered the walls, along with giant, hand-drawn posters of schematics. Aelita scurried in and took a seat by Jeremie. Of the six of them, she was the one who had changed the least: she'd kept her short, pink hair, and she still wore a pink sweater and black skirt. Everyone paused for a moment, looking at the group sitting around the table. Ulrich sat tense, his strong muscles rippling beneath his collared shirt. Odd slumped back, showing the laid-back energy that shone through his music. Beth nervously curled her hair with her finger, while Herb occasionally tapped commands into a laptop, keeping a close eye on Lyoko's status. Jeremie stood up and pressed a button on the remote. A small screen dropped from the ceiling and a projector in the back of the room began displaying images from Lyoko.

"So, what do we know?" asked Ulrich. "What is he after? Does he just want to destroy the world like he first did?"

Jeremie changed the images to diagrams of the Lyoko system. Red lines overlaid black showing various paths in the system emanating from the center, which was marked by the unblinking Eye. "No. His attacks have been targeted solely at us and the system itself. My guess is that he wants to control it. Each attack has been centered on different computers on the network." He pointed to sections of the diagrams as he spoke. "Control center. Region mapping storage. Artificial intelligence template storage. Matter matrix processors. He hasn't really been attacking them, just learning how they respond to his manipulation. He seems to be slowly breaking the locks that have kept him out of the most critical systems. He wants control, but I don't know why."

Odd frowned. "Sounds like things dealing with virtualization." Jeremie only nodded.

Beth blinked as an idea formed. "Would he be trying to materialize his monsters?"

Jeremie pursed his lips. "I don't know. We'll just have to wait and see. In the meantime, I suggest we—"

"I've got something!" Herb suddenly shouted. "X.A.N.A. Tower in the forest."

Jeremie groaned, quite aggravated. "I don't even have the third scanner in one piece yet."

Herb looked at him. "So? It's not like that limits us to two people."

"I know, but I don't know how the other two will hold up. I don't want to take any sort of risk if I don't have to." Herb nodded in agreement. "So, who's going?"

"Well, I have to go," Aelita stated flatly. She stood up and started stretching. "Yay

me.”

“I’ll go.” declared Ulrich. “I’ll have to do it sometime. Better sooner than later.” Jeremie smiled slightly and shrugged.

Everyone hurried to their positions. Herb and Jeremie went to their makeshift control room. Ulrich and Aelita ran downstairs to the scanners. Beth and Odd went to the first-floor computer stations and began tracking and recording X.A.N.A.'s movements and actions. Computer displays flickered to life, showing details about every part of the system.

Down in the scanner room, Ulrich and Aelita stepped into the two scanners. The doors slid shut, and Ulrich tensed as machinery wound to life. The scanning ring began to glow with the energy pulsating through it. Jeremie followed through each step of the virtualization procedure with verbal announcements over a speaker hidden somewhere in the tall scanning devices: scan, upload, and transfer. Ulrich closed his eyes as the glowing ring worked its way along the tall, cylindrical device. He could feel his cells being scanned and fed into the system. Suddenly, everything stopped. Ulrich opened his eyes and looked himself over. He was dressed in the samurai outfit that he had been so used to all those years to go. He tested his movements. Finally, he withdrew his katana; the steel blade shone in the artificial lighting of the virtual world. Behind him, Aelita stepped forward and put her hand on his shoulder, pulling him in the direction of the pulses emanating from the activated tower.

In the control room, Jeremie smirked. “And we have...virtualization!”

Ulrich glanced amusedly at Aelita as he sheathed his blade. “Quite the dramatist, isn't he?”

She laughed. “Yeah, he is.”

“I heard that,” intoned Jeremie. “Get going.”

Ulrich and Aelita ran along the tree-lined path. Tall, pixelated trees loomed overhead. Ulrich wondered at what kind of trees they might actually be. They stood like redwoods, but they branched more like pines, high above his head, into palm-like fronds. As he examined one of the trees, he noticed a small movement. From behind the tree came a small swarm of hornets, aiming straight for him. He leaped into the air, reaching for his blade. The hornets had no time to react. A swipe left, right, above; he landed, his katana already back in its sheath. Behind him the entire swarm dissolved into shimmering shards of light. Aelita ran over to where Ulrich was crouched. He rose, smirking. *I've still got it*, he thought. The two continued down the path to the tower.

As the two approached the tower, two spherical tanks appeared in front of them. Ulrich motioned for Aelita to get behind him; she did so obediently. Ulrich reached into his mind, summoning all of his strength into one burst.

“*Triplicate!*”

As the clones were created, Ulrich thought about what Jeremie and Aelita once told him about how the process worked. They had said that his consciousness was also tripled: each one was a complete copy of him, down to his very thoughts. It troubled him to think about; whenever one of the clones was destroyed, he died. Yet he also survived in a different clone. He pushed it out of his mind like every other time. Suddenly, new streams of sensation flooded his mind. He was no more one body, but three. He pulled his mind back from the physical bodies and their senses. The battle became a sort of chess game, and he had just promoted his pawns to queens. He focused in on the center piece long enough to tell Aelita to follow him—it didn't seem correct to refer to it as 'him'

anymore, but it always made the others more comfortable—and turned back to his chess game. Ulrich sent the two side clones to deal with the tanks as Aelita and the center Ulrich ran between them. The tanks rotated, realizing Aelita, not any of the Ulrichs, was the real target. Ulrich stopped Aelita and the clone accompanying her directly between them. The two spheres split, preparing to launch energy waves at them. As the newly generated waves began to spread, Ulrich sent the other two clones to block the waves with their swords. Ulrich hurried Aelita to the tower before the tanks could end the wave and reorient themselves. The two defending clones were finally defeated by the waves, and the waves continued their set path unopposed until they came upon the tanks opposite them. Both tanks exploded spectacularly just as Ulrich fell back into the one remaining body, slightly dazed at the sudden jolt. He followed Aelita into the tower.

Outside of the tower, the world was definitely infinite, but the manner in which the land and objects were arranged suggested a sort of limit or border on the universe. Inside the tower, any illusion of finiteness disappeared. Walls and boundaries gave way to data and energy freely flowing through an infinite space. Two platforms, one where Ulrich and Aelita stood and another above them, were the only things to suggest a definable world. As the two floated to the second platform, Ulrich observed the data floating by them. Lines of code and information were punctuated by the Eye that was the symbol of this virtual world. They reached the platform, and Aelita entered the code: *Lyoko*. All of the energy floating through the infinite space rushed back towards a central point; its infinite expansion reversed to a single point of contact. Time began to slow. Just before the point reached its critical mass, Ulrich saw one of the last bits of information to reach the center of the blast point. It was an image. A man dressed in complete black, his jet black hair swept back. The image began to shift; the man moved. He stared back at Ulrich, looking blankly at him with black eyes. Ulrich stared back into those eyes. The man's eyes glinted: a ringed circle with four tabs.

X.A.N.A.'s eyes.

Just as Ulrich registered that thought, the point where everything had collected exploded into a temporal wave. Time began reversing. Waves of probability and causality coalesced and reestablished themselves. Ulrich felt himself pulled away from where he had been. He felt the sudden shock of time correcting its flow.

A strong wind blew the withered old man's draping cloak. He turned his eyes north. Clouds were settling on Mount Fuji; a storm was brewing.

Better hurry. He thought. *The storm is coming fast.* He turned to a young woman following him. Her black kimono fluttered as she stood expressionless.

“We'd best make it back before nightfall, Yumi. The storm will be here by then.”

Yumi frowned. Something was wrong. She felt as though she had remembered something, but didn't know what. She decided to ask her grandfather about it later. He would know. Calls from him snapped her out of her trance, and she hurried to catch up to him.

“...And with that, Ulrich Stern finishes off the season with a record 62 goals this season. Back to you, Lynn.”

“Thanks, Ted. In other news this evening...”

Ulrich shut off the television. "We need to go. Now."

Odd shook his head. "No," he said, "The tickets are for tomorrow morning. It's impossible to leave any earlier than that."

"I know his plan, Odd."

"Huh?"

Ulrich leveled his eyes at Odd. "He's coming."

"What does you mean?"

"He's coming to Earth." Ulrich's voice hardened. "Himself."

Hours later, Ulrich and Odd arrived at the factory. Jeremie met them at the door. "I got your message. What happened?"

"I saw a man dressed in black. He had X.A.N.A.'s eyes. It was very detailed; scanner quality. Not like other things in Lyoko."

Jeremie frowned. "This would explain his recent activity. Everything he has been accessing has been related in some way to the scanners."

Odd pushed them both inside and to a small table. As they sat down, he asked, "So what does that actually mean, Einstein? Why would he come to Earth?"

"I don't know. While he's in Lyoko, he has all of its resources. The AI subroutines, the computing power, the direct connection to its networks. Everything. He must have a reason if he is going to actually materialize himself, especially when he knows we are right here to stop him."

At that moment alarms sounded throughout the building. They hurried to the upstairs control room. Jeremie began furiously typing on a half dozen keyboards, jumping from console to console. Displays flashed, data streaming down them faster than Ulrich could keep up. Jeremie frowned; sweat dripped from his forehead down onto his glasses. He threw them aside, not bothering to clean them. Suddenly he froze. "Oh my God."

Ulrich stared at him. Jeremie had never looked so troubled, even during the roughest fights with X.A.N.A. "What is it?" he asked, putting his hand on Jeremie's shoulder.

Jeremie started shaking his head. Ulrich sensed Jeremie tensing more and more. "It's not possible. Not all of them. I don't see how. He can't do that. He never could. It just doesn't make sense."

Odd lightly smacked Jeremie. "You're the one not making any sense, Einstein. What's going on?"

Jeremie turned to Ulrich and Odd. He took a couple seconds to regain his composure, and started to explain the situation. "It's X.A.N.A."

"He's activated a tower?"

Jeremie shook his head. "Not *a* tower. *All* of them. He's activated every tower on Lyoko."

Odd looked at Jeremie quizzically. "Can he do that?"

"No. At least, he shouldn't be able to do it. He should have only one interface node, which only connects to one tower. I don't know how he managed it, but he did."

Ulrich shrugged his shoulders. "Well I guess we'd better get to Lyoko and try to deactivate them all."

Jeremie frowned. "We can't. He's taken over all of the transfer towers. Nothing can enter or leave Lyoko without X.A.N.A.'s permission."

Ulrich looked around. "Where's everybody else?"

“Aelita was in Lyoko. Beth and Herb were down repairing the...”—Jeremie's face whitened—“...scanners. We have to get down there.”

Ulrich opened the door to the office and bounded down the stairs. “One step ahead of you.”

Downstairs computers were running at full power; some had already burned out, and others were smoking. The smell of melting plastic wafted through the air. The eye flickered on and off, jumping from one display to another. The three of them ran to the cargo elevator. Jeremie entered a code into the keypad as he had hundreds of times before. The elevator rose to ground level. The door remained closed, however. Ulrich motioned for Jeremie and Odd to step back, which they did. Moments flitted by before anything happened. Suddenly, lightning surrounded the door to the elevator, throwing it open and releasing smoke to reveal the passengers inside. In one corner were Beth and Herb, slumped over and unconscious. In the center of the elevator was a tall figure dressed in black. Ulrich stood motionless. It was him.

The man spoke in a clear, deep voice. “So, we finally meet.”

His eyes glowed eerily.

Yumi Ishiyama sat at the table with her grandfather. They were eating sushi, or at least that's what her grandfather told her it was. Despite being one of the wisest men she knew, he was hopeless while in a kitchen. She thought she saw a beetle shell, but then it could well have been a shrimp tail saturated with soy sauce. Normally something like that wouldn't have stopped her eating, since it was practically a normal occurrence, but today she stopped. She put down her chopsticks and looked down to the floor.

Her grandfather, ever perceptive with eyes like a hawk, noticed. “Something is bothering you, Yumi.”

She winced slightly. It always bothered her when he simply stated things like that instead of asking her whether something was wrong. For one thing, she had no chance to object, and second, he was always right. She sighed and decided that resisting him wasn't worth the effort. She took a deep breath and quietly said, “I had another vision.”

“Oh?”

Yumi was sure he would have paused at that, but he continued to eat as though she had just commented on the weather. She shifted uncomfortably and continued, “Yes. It was as though I had already been here, and was back again.” She paused a moment. “I thought they had stopped. Why did they come back?”

He only glanced at her, then turned his eyes back to his food. “I am not the one you should ask that question.”

Yumi frowned. He meant, of course, that she knew the answer herself, deep down. The only problem with that was that she really did not know. Every time she would ask him a question like that, he would turn the question back to her, and each time she couldn't come up with an answer. Knowing she was not going to get an answer from either of them, she resolved to get some sleep. She began to rise, telling her grandfather, “I'm going to my r—”

“Before you go,” interrupted her grandfather, “I have something for you.” He rose and went to the next room, where a large shipping package sat in the center. He lifted the lid and pulled out a small object, about six inches long. He handed it to her. “The box arrived yesterday. Your parents told me not to show it to you, but they're on the far side

of the planet. I doubt they'll find out.” He winked slightly, and pushed her out of the room. “Now go on to bed. You can look at the rest in the morning.”

Yumi walked absentmindedly to her room, examining the object all the way. She entered her room, shut the door, and sat down on her bed. At one end of the object there was a small clasp. She undid the clasp and opened it to find that it was a fan. It wasn't like other fans she had seen, although it did have Japanese stylings to it. Instead, it opened to a near perfect circle, and almost smooth; the creases in the paper could barely be seen. She felt the edge. The paper cut her finger slightly, and she winced. Yumi folded the fan and clasped it shut, setting it down on a table by the bed.

Laying down, Yumi stared at the mysterious fan. As she stared at it, she felt that there was a long history behind it. It was as though it was not hers, but someone else's. It was a relic of a long-ago era. Someone far in the past had used it for something very important, but Yumi found it long after its meaning had been lost. Finally, she fell asleep.

Two days passed. Yumi spent her waking hours poring over the objects within the box. It was mostly what she had expected; there was a great number of school supplies, a couple of French textbooks, finished assignments. There were also many things from her life at home: a few stuffed animals, some toys, make-up, and so on. Yumi scrutinized each item, cradling and feeling them, afraid of missing any small part of the past she had forgotten. Her grandfather peeked in every once in a while, bringing food and drink. She never seemed to notice him, and he never tried to distract her.

Towards evening on the second day, she finally made it to the last item in the box. It was a small wooden box made of well-worked oak. There were no trimmings on it, nor any markings as to what was inside. There was a small keyhole on the front where the box was locked shut. Yumi searched everything in the room for a key to fit the box, but could not find it anywhere. Exhausted, and about at the point of giving up on the box, she went to her room and collapsed onto her bed. She put the box alongside the fan she had looked at the night before. Noticing something about the fan, she picked it up and opened the clasp. The clasp had a hinge on one end, where it rotated freely. The other end fit into a notch in the other arm of the fan. The clasp itself resembled nothing so much as a small key. She tried to fit the clasp into the keyhole, where it fit perfectly. Turning the lock caused the box to open. She put her hand down in the box, and pulled out a small book. On the cover was a peculiar marking drawn in pencil: a small circle inside of a larger ring. To Yumi, it looked much like an eye. She opened the front cover. Yumi thumbed through the book, and saw that it was in her own handwriting. It was a diary, of sorts. She turned to the first entry.

July 26, 2003

My friends and I found something amazing the other day. So amazing that I think I'd better write everything down. It's going to seem crazy to anyone reading this, but everything here is the complete truth.

I should probably mention everyone involved in this, just to be clear on everything for whoever reads this. My name is Yumi Ishiyama. I am a student at the Kadic academy in Paris. I'm the oldest of our group of

friends. The others involved are Jeremie Belpois, Ulrich Stern, and Odd Della Robbia. They are all also students of Kadic, but they are a year behind me...

Yumi paused, trying to remember who these people were. Unable to do so, she continued reading the diary. It went on to discuss a factory in France where she and her friends found a secret laboratory underground. In the laboratory, they found a gigantic computer which contained a 'virtual world'. A virus had infected the supercomputer, and formed an intelligence called "X.A.N.A." They fought to keep the virus from taking over the world by actually *traveling* to the virtual world, where a virtual person named Aelita could reverse time.

Yumi stopped reading and almost dropped the book on the floor. If the book was right, she helped save the world on a regular basis. It was crazy. There was no way it could be true. But deep down, she knew it was true. After taking a moment to take that in, she continued reading.

Eventually, they had brought Aelita to the real world without interference from X.A.N.A. There the entries ended. Yumi flipped through the next few pages, trying to find whether X.A.N.A. had been defeated and whether it had anything to do with her loss of memory. She was just about to close it when an envelope fell from the book. Yumi picked it up. There was a letter in it, in different handwriting than her own. She read it slowly; the pencil it was written with had just about worn away.

Dear Yumi,

Your parents have been keeping you away from us since the accident. Hopefully this letter will get to you.

First off, my name is Ulrich. I hope you remember me; I know I'll always remember you. If not, hopefully this journal will help your memory.

Chances are that you have already read most if not all of the journal. I never knew you kept it, but I'm glad you did. You should already know all about Lyoko and X.A.N.A. What you don't probably know is the end of the story.

This story begins about two weeks before you lost your memory. Jeremie finally managed to free Aelita from the virus that kept her tied to Lyoko. The next day we all went down to the core of the supercomputer to shut X.A.N.A. down once and for all. We all decided that you should be the one to pull the switch. Just as you touched it, an electrical pulse shocked you, knocking you unconscious just as you switched it off. When you awoke, you had forgotten everything about us, Lyoko, X.A.N.A., and much of your time at Kadic.

Obviously, we really couldn't keep anything a secret anymore. Not that it mattered, really: X.A.N.A. was deactivated, and Lyoko was shut down. The government decided everything should be kept under wraps, but Jeremie managed to stay on the team studying the Lyoko system. He says that some of the burned circuits seem to indicate that X.A.N.A. may have been trying to download himself into your mind or something like

that, but the power was cut before he did anything too serious besides the memory loss.

Your parents were obviously upset; they wouldn't let you anywhere near us. They want to send you back to Japan. If they do, please know that I miss you. I hope we can see each other again.

*Until we meet again,
Ulrich Stern*

At the bottom of the page was a quickly scrawled phone number. Yumi put the letter beside the still open book. It was too incredible to believe. She had imagined all sorts of improbable stories to explain her loss of memory, but she had never seriously considered them. But there in that letter was the truth, and it was something she had never imagined. She saved the world. Not just once, but on a regular basis. She helped defeat an artificial intelligence bent on destroying the world. Yet, as crazy as it was, she knew it was true. Somehow, it felt right; it was like a puzzle piece that was turned around and fell directly into the hole where it fit. She sat for a moment, trying to see if her memory had been jogged any. She thought over all of the stories in the journal, thinking about all of the people who had parts in them. Still, they were nothing more than characters out of a book, playing out stories she had only read about. Slowly she drifted off to sleep.

Ulrich stepped out of the terminal at the New Tokyo International Airport. Pausing occasionally to read signs he passed, he managed to find his way into a taxi and made it to the hotel he would be staying in. He entered the room and collapsed on the bed. Images from the past few days ran through his mind: X.A.N.A. coming to earth; the team narrowly escaping with the elevator before X.A.N.A. could attack them; the factory filling with block monsters as its assembly lines created tanks. After completely controlling the factory, X.A.N.A. took over the power and communication grids through all of Paris, sending the city into chaos until his monsters had occupied the city. He then began a search for Ulrich and his friends, who snuck out of the city to regroup and come up with a plan. Ulrich was to go to Japan and try to find Yumi, since they would be needing as much help as they could get. Jeremie thought that analyzing whatever X.A.N.A. had done to her could help in some way. So, Ulrich found himself sitting in a cheap Japanese hotel, trying to figure out how in the world he would find someone who had been purposely hidden from him for nearly 15 years. He had the name of her grandfather, but he had no idea where in Japan he lived.

Ulrich sat up, thinking he might look over the room before actually falling asleep. He glanced at the bed and furniture, looked inside some of the drawers, and stopped at the telephone. He considered asking the front desk for a wake-up call but thought better of it; he realized that jet lag was really going to hurt in the morning. Just as he began turning away from the phone, he noticed something almost hidden behind a lamp. Picking it up, he realized it was a phone book. He wondered for a moment at the fact that he hadn't thought about a phone book, then sat down and thumbed through the pages until he found the "Ishiyama" listings. There, second in the list, was the name he had been searching for. He pulled out a notepad and jotted the number and address. Picking up the phone, Ulrich started to dial the number before realizing what time it was. He put down the

receiver, picked it back up, and dialed the front desk.

“Hello? Yes. I'd like a wake-up call, please.”

Yumi sat in her room impatiently. Her grandfather occasionally had visitors, but this was the first time he had asked her to stay in her room. He usually kept her informed about his business and finances in case she needed to take over for him for whatever reason. She sat, thinking about what reason he would have for wanting privacy like this.

She looked down at the notebook she had in her hands. It had been three days, and already she had almost filled it. After she had finished with the old journal, Yumi decided it might be a good idea to start a new diary where she could jot down any thought, impression, or even any memories she might have. Looking back through the objects in the box revealed many emotions Yumi hadn't noticed the first time; the journal had certainly loosed something, but she still wasn't sure what that something was. She hadn't regained any memories, either.

The opening of her door snapped her out of her reverie. Her grandfather stood in the doorway, motioning her towards him. She got up and followed him out of her room and down the hallway and into the kitchen. There, sitting at the table was a tall, brown-haired, fair-skinned man, about the same age as Yumi. He had a slightly German look to him, and his musculature gave that he was definitely athletic. He practically jumped to his feet as she entered the room.

Ulrich had been preparing for that moment; he knew she had changed over the years. What he hadn't, rather, couldn't prepare for was the emotions that flooded his mind. Memories of their time together at Kadic, the feelings they were beginning to feel then, the loss he felt when she was sent away; they all flashed through his mind the moment he set eyes on her. He struggled to say something, but nothing entered his mind. He was completely speechless. He was somewhat relieved, however, when Yumi spoke first.

“You are...Ulrich?” She questioned cautiously. She didn't know how she knew him, but she was almost sure who he was.

“Y-yes,” he stammered. “I...didn't think you'd recognize me.”

“Neither did I, but somehow, I just know who you are.”

Both stood silently. There was an awkward silence. After a couple moments, Yumi's grandfather broke the silence. “Sit down, Yumi. You have much to speak about, and not much time to speak.” He slipped out as she sat at the table across from Ulrich.

Ulrich stammered a bit, trying to think of something to say. “So, um...how have you been?”

Yumi smiled weakly. “Not bad. You?”

“Good.” Ulrich sat, unsure of what to say. He hadn't realized how strongly he still felt towards her.

It was Yumi who next broke the silence. “So, what brings you here?”

“Well, we need your help.” Ulrich went on to tell of X.A.N.A. coming back online, his coming to the real world, and how they were trying to fight back. “Jeremie thinks that this has something to do with you and what happened to you fifteen years ago.”

“So, you want me to go back and help you defeat him,” Yumi replied once he had finished.

“Yes. Jeremie seems pretty sure that whatever might be in your mind could be a big help.”

Yumi sat quietly for a moment before speaking, "I...I have to think about it." Ulrich said nothing. "It's not that I don't want to help you. I really do. But...I just need to think. This is all still very new to me; I hadn't heard any of this until just a few days ago. I just--"

"I understand. It all must still be a shock. Just think about it. But please, decide as soon as you can. The others are fighting as we speak."

Yumi nodded, then rose and walked out of the room. She passed her grandfather, who was in his room meditating, and went to her room and shut the door. She sat down on her bed, holding her head in her hands. She sat there, not thinking, for a long while. When she finally looked up, her eyes fell on the journal. She picked it up and thumbed through it, not looking for anything in particular. Dropping the book, she bent over to pick it up. It had fallen open to one of the early entries, one directly after the first attack by X.A.N.A.

August 4, 2003

I'm scared. I didn't show it to the others since I'm the oldest, but I am. The virus that is taking over the supercomputer in the factory is more than anyone could imagine. It can actually control electricity in our world, and more. It almost killed Odd. Aelita, the girl we found on Lyoko, told us she had to get to one of the 'towers' that the virus had activated. Ulrich and I had to enter the scanners and defeat the "monsters," as Odd calls them, so she could reach the tower. Jeremie found and activated a program that somehow reverses time, so everything was undone.

Ironically, it's not all of that that scares me. Jeremie says that the virus could attack again at any time. That means that someone has to be willing to go to Lyoko every time and help Aelita get to the tower. Ulrich and Odd said they wanted to help out, and Jeremie wants to learn how everything works. They asked me if I wanted to help them. I couldn't answer. They acted like it was simple: beat the bad guy, save the day. I wish I could be that way. All I can think about is having the entire world relying on me. If I messed up, this X.A.N.A. or whatever could take over Paris, then France, then everywhere. And it would be my fault. I don't know what to do. I'm afraid to say yes, but I can't say no. If I say no, then it will definitely be my fault. I suppose if I say yes, then there's a chance I could do it.

Yumi stared at the entry. It was as if she had written it just now. The same thoughts, the same emotions, the same doubts. And it still came down to the same conclusion: she couldn't just say no. The world was at stake, and if she said no, she would be guilty of letting the world fall into the hands of a demonic artificial intelligence. She had to help.

She rose and ran back to the kitchen, hoping to catch Ulrich before he left. When she entered the room, however, Ulrich was gone. Her heart sank. There was no way she could find him on her own. She turned back to the hallway, tears in her eyes for letting him get away. She stepped toward the hallway and paused. She had missed something. Her eyes went back to the floor by the table. There was a little slip of paper; it must have blown off when Ulrich got up from the table. Yumi picked up the slip of paper and examined it. It was a plane ticket: tomorrow morning, Flight 203 to Paris.

She ran to her room.

Ulrich took his seat on the airplane. He managed to get himself situated the way he liked on these long flights (slightly turned, with his shoulder resting against the window) and looked at the empty seat next to him. He had left the ticket for that seat on the table as he had left the night before, hoping she might change her mind. Hope was sinking fast, as he had been one of the last to get on the plane, thanks to the crowd of fans who had managed to find him, and the chances for her to get on were diminishing rapidly.

The stewardess began to slowly shut the door coming from the gate, but yanked it back open just in time for someone to get on. Ulrich half rose to get a view of who was getting on, and almost fell back down. It was Yumi, but instead of a kimono she was wearing a black T-shirt and black pants. Ulrich thought for a second that he had gone back in school at Kadic, but banged his head on the low racks above him, reminding himself that he was still on the plane and still taller than the luggage rack. He sat back down as she did the same, nursing his banged head.

Ulrich spoke first, "So. You came."

Yumi nodded. "Yeah."

"So..."

"Well, I couldn't just let the world be destroyed, even if I am scared."

"That's true. That does lend some weight to it."

"Yeah."

Both were silent for a while. Ulrich tried to come up with something to say, but everything seemed wrong in one way or another. His lips tightened as he thought. Yumi watched him from the corner of her eye, afraid of looking directly at him even though she knew she had no reason to be. They both sat as the plane took off and began the flight to France. Finally, Yumi managed to say something.

"So...tell me about the others."

Ulrich started slightly at the sound of her voice. "What?"

"The others. Jeremie and Odd and everyone. Tell me about them. I want to know what they're like."

"Oh." Ulrich thought for a moment. "Well, let's see. I suppose the best way to describe Jeremie is that he's a geek. He couldn't run a mile to save his life, but give him pretty much anything with a power source and he can fix it. Especially computers. Give him two calculators and he could hack the CIA."

"Wow," replied Yumi.

"Yeah. It's almost scary how good he is. Odd's starting to run out of famous scientist names to call him," he chuckled.

"Odd...tell me about him."

"Odd? Oh dear. I'm almost afraid to do that." Ulrich winked at Yumi, who laughed softly. "He's the type that can't resist a joke, no matter how bad it may be. Whenever you find yourself in a serious moment, you can count on him for a bad pun or two..."

Ulrich and Yumi continued like this for hours until it felt as though they had never been apart. By the time the plane landed, Yumi found herself wondering what things would have been like between them had the last fifteen years not happened.

The plane landed, and Ulrich and Yumi exited the plane and walked down the terminal to the entrance where Jeremie and Odd were waiting for them. Ulrich made the

introductions.

“Odd and Jeremie, Yumi. Yumi, Odd and Jeremie,” he said, pointing them out to her. His demeanor turned serious and he turned to Jeremie. “What’d we miss?”

Jeremie motioned outside. “Tell you on the way. We should probably get back as quickly as we can.”

Ulrich nodded and they all exited the building and walked out to a car that looked to have had some serious work done recently.

“I made some modifications to this car so that X.A.N.A. couldn't take control of it,” explained Jeremie. “Barely finished before I had to come here, as you see. I did manage to put in real leather seats, though.”

“By my insistence, of course,” chimed Odd. “A comfortable Odd is a happy Odd.”

They all climbed in and began the drive to Paris. With X.A.N.A. controlling the city, they had to go quite a ways towards the coast, as nearer airports had shut down. Yumi watched them closely on the trip back. Jeremie and Ulrich sat in front, discussing the state of everything and the plans for the next few days. Odd at first talked with Yumi, but soon fell asleep. Yumi watched Ulrich intensely. There was so much she wanted to remember, especially about him. She knew they had been close; that much she somehow knew just by being near him. But nothing she did would bring back any memories. Tears came to her eyes, though she could not say why. She turned her attention to the discussion between Ulrich and Jeremie.

“So that's it, then.” Ulrich leaned his head back on the seat.

Jeremie nodded. “Yeah. To fix all of this, we have to get to Lyoko, but with that army of monsters there's no way to get there. Ah, we're here.” Jeremie stopped the car in front of a warehouse on the outskirts of the city. Most of the windows were broken, and all of the surrounding buildings had scorch marks where X.A.N.A.'s patrols had attacked.

As soon as they had all climbed out of the car, a door squeaked open, and Aelita ran out to meet them. Jeremie ran up and embraced her. When the others had caught up, Aelita began speaking. “You're just on time. We're just about ready.”

Jeremie grinned. “Really? I figured you'd need another couple of hours.”

Aelita punched him playfully. “Hey, I *was* a computer for quite a while. This stuff is a piece of cake.”

Jeremie smiled again and walked to the open door with the others following behind. They entered the main room, where nearly two dozen computers were running various programs and simulations.

“Wow,” exclaimed Ulrich. “Where did all of these computers come from, Jeremie?”

Odd nudged him and innocently intoned, “Let's just say that the local neighborhoods were quite...generous.” He cringed at the look he got from Ulrich. “We'll give them back. Well, the ones that are in one piece.”

Jeremie broke in, “We can talk about that later. Right now, we have to figure out what we're going to do.”

“What do you mean?” Odd asked. “Aren't we gonna scan Yumi's memory or whatever?”

Jeremie shook his head. “The only equipment that was capable of something like that was damaged when we had to abandon the last hideout. I don't have anything here that could come close to doing something like that.”

“So what are we going to do?” asked Ulrich.

Jeremie frowned. “There's nothing we can do right now. Those memories will have

to wait. We do, however, need to start planning our next move, whatever that is.”

Aelita stretched. “Well, whatever it is, it’ll have to wait for morning. I don’t think I could look at another computer monitor today.” Yumi looked outside and saw that the sun was nearly set.

Herb stood up. “Agreed. If you haven’t got your health, you haven’t got anything.”

“Alright then,” said Jeremie. “Everyone get some sleep. We’ll discuss everything in the morning.”

In another part of the warehouse, some mattresses and blankets had been gathered. Yumi watched everyone lie down and eventually fall asleep. She lied there, thinking on the events of the past few days and waiting for sleep to come. It never came, however, and she found her thoughts drifting more and more towards Ulrich. She knew they had been close from what she read in the journal. She wished she could remember something from that time. Laying her head on the pillow, she tried to do a sort of meditation, breathing deeply and focusing on Ulrich, trying to pull any memory at all from her mind. Having no success other than a slight headache (and slightly hyperventilating from the breathing), Yumi rose and quietly walked outside to the open street that ran along the face of the warehouse. The sun had already set; the only light came from the few dozen stars overhead. She watched as a cloud moved and revealed two more stars. Watching the stars calmed her, and she turned to go inside. She froze as she reached for the handle.

A light, rhythmic tapping sound rounded the corner behind her. A flash of light blinded her before she could turn around, and a searing pain shot through her left arm. Then, the door opened and an explosion vaguely registered in her mind. She felt strong arms embrace her as she lost consciousness.

Ulrich leaned back against a wall, slowly sliding into a sitting position. A single ray of sunshine from the dawn outside partially blinded him, so he closed his eyes. It felt restful; he hadn’t slept the rest of the night. A few feet away Yumi lay, still unconscious. Beth had made a makeshift bandage and sling for her right arm. Ulrich smiled as he realized how ironic that the laser wound had cauterized itself, preventing any serious blood loss. As the sun moved to hit Yumi’s face, she awoke.

“Whoa,” moaned Yumi. “What happened?” She started to sit up, but a shooting pain convinced her to stay down. “Ow. Bad idea.”

Ulrich moved over to her and helped her into a sitting position, leaning her against a cracked support beam. Yumi twisted her face, trying to work through the fog of pain in her mind. “What happened?”

Ulrich sat down beside her. “Kankrelat snuck up behind you. You’re lucky I noticed you’d left, or you’d have a couple more of those bandages.” He smiled grimly, obviously concerned.

“Well, then,”—she grabbed his hand with her good arm and raised it a little—“It’s a good thing I have my own knight in shining armor.”

They both froze for a moment with their hands together. They heard Jeremie’s footsteps coming up, and pulled away from each other, blushing slightly. Thankfully, Jeremie didn’t seem to notice.

“Ah, good to see you back among the living, Yumi,” Jeremie said. “If you feel up to it, there’s things we all must discuss. Meet me in that small room over there.” He pointed over his shoulder. “I’ll get everyone else.” He strode off before either one could answer.

Ulrich helped Yumi up with the utmost propriety, and the two worked their way to a small room on the other side of the building. It looked as though it had once been little more than a snack room; a forgotten refrigerator sulked in the corner, rust ever so slowly slinking down its door. The two stood in silence as they waited for the others to arrive.

Aelita was the first to arrive. She groggily stared at them through her one open eye and muttered, "Yumi? You're awake? Good. I'm going back to sleep," and promptly curled up into a corner and closed her eyes. A moment later the others filed into the room with Jeremie at the end of the line. He lightly kicked Aelita awake and began to speak.

"I'm sure everyone is by now familiar with the events that occurred last night, so I won't bother with them. Suffice it to say that we're all still here." He glanced at Yumi, then continued. "What we need to worry about now is that it's a pretty good bet that X.A.N.A. has figured out where we are, now that he's lost one of his drones. I wouldn't be surprised if he's got a whole army of monsters headed this way. We need to get out of this place. It's not safe anymore."

"Well, darn," interrupted Odd. "I was just starting to like the molds in the corners. And I think they liked me back."

Jeremie glared at him over his glasses and continued, "Anyway, we need to figure out what we're going to do. I've looked over my maps of the city, and there's really nowhere I could find within reach that would work as a hideout. At least, nothing that's not already crawling with monsters."

"So what do we do?" asked Beth.

Jeremie shrugged. "I honestly don't know."

Everyone was silent, each desperately racking their minds for an idea. Yumi looked around at all of them. Aelita sat, absentmindedly pushing a little pebble around with her hand. Odd stroked his straggled, blond goatee. Beth and Herb alternated between looking at each other and the ground. As her eyes fell on Ulrich, he saw his eyes narrow as he began to speak.

"We fight."

The others all turned to stare at him.

"What?" asked Jeremie.

"We fight back. Until now it's always been X.A.N.A. pushing us around while we just sit back and wait for him to find us again." He raised his hand to stop Jeremie, who was about to say something. "I know. 'We've been looking for a way to stop him.' I'm really starting to think we're not going to find it like this, though. We need to bring the fight to *him*."

After a short pause, Odd nodded. "I agree."

Jeremie grinned. "Actually, what I was going to say was that that was exactly the same thing I was going to say. What do the rest of you think?" They all agreed. "Great. Odd, Ulrich, and I will plan out what we're going to do. The rest of you, see what we can salvage from all of this. Some of it should come in handy." Everyone nodded, and the meeting was dispersed.

Once outside, Aelita snuck up beside Yumi. "So, are you two back together or what?"

Yumi jumped at the question. "W-what?"

Aelita nudged her. "Oh, come on. I saw the way you two were acting earlier. You both like each other."

Yumi shifted uncomfortably from one foot to another. "Well, yeah, kinda. But, I

mean-” She picked up some strange gadget and started fiddling with it. “It's just that, I've only known him for a few days. I mean, yeah I've known him for I-don't-know-how-long, but I don't remember that, so to me, it's like I don't know him.”

Aelita nodded knowingly. “I know what you mean. One time, there was a scanner accident, and I couldn't remember what cheese tasted like.” Yumi stared at Aelita, dumbfounded. Aelita grinned and elbowed her playfully. “I'm kidding. But seriously, make up your mind this time. I remember the last time you played that game. The two of you just fumbled around until you lost your chance. At least make up your own minds this time.”

Yumi stared at her shoes silently. Aelita smiled, squeezed Yumi's shoulder for a minute, and walked off to a far table and began packing things into backpacks.

The last red rays of light from the sunset shined on Ulrich's face as he and the others left the old warehouse. They had waited until dark to leave so they would have some cover as they worked their way into the city to where the nearest entrance to the sewers was located. He was in the lead, carrying a semi-automatic pistol to take out any monsters they might meet along the way. Odd had one as well, following behind the rest of them. They traveled like this, barely speaking and often stopping or taking roundabout paths to stay away from X.A.N.A.'s sentries. It seemed like hours they traveled until they reached their immediate goal. They had planned to stop at Kadic Academy and rest before actually facing X.A.N.A. It had seemed a good place to stop; it was close enough to the factory that X.A.N.A. was less worried about securing it and from there they could take the sewer passage to the factory.

Ulrich pushed the sewer lid to the side. He peeked over the edge, seeing the park just outside the campus. Treetops rustled quietly as a slight breeze blew above him. There were no movements, mechanical or otherwise. He motioned the others to come up with him.

They ran through the gate to Kadic, hurrying towards the dormitory. Once inside, they found a room with a large enough window to escape through. Yumi looked at it worriedly, hoping they wouldn't need it.

Aelita fell onto the bed. “Ow. My feet hurt.”

Odd smirked. “Yeah, and you don't smell so good, either.”

“Yeah? Well at least it's not my usual smell.” Aelita winked at Odd and ducked as a pillow flew her way.

Jeremie sat down in a chair in the corner. He looked intently at the room. “You know, this room seems familiar somehow.”

“Yeah,” Ulrich slowly added. “It does somehow.”

Odd jumped suddenly and started examining a vent in the wall. “Aha! It's our old room, Ulrich. Anybody hungry?” He emerged from the vent with a handful of small packages.

Beth shied away. “Ew, what are those!?”

“Twinkies.” Odd casually replied. “They last forever, you know.”

“You mean those have been there for fifteen years?” asked Ulrich. “I think I'll pass.”

Odd shrugged and sat in his corner eating any that hadn't been opened by rats. Jeremie just raised his eyebrows and shook his head. “Let's just get some sleep. We've got a long day ahead of us.”

Ulrich stood. "Do you hear that?"

They all shook their head and responded negatively. Ulrich motioned them all to be quiet. He listened at the door, afraid that he had recognized the sound.

"Hey, I hear it too," responded Odd, who reached for the gun at his side. He pushed past Ulrich and opened the door to see what was making the sound. His body stiffened.

"RUN!!"

Ulrich reached for the door to see, but Odd held it nearly closed. "What is it?"

"Kankrelats. About twenty. They've got both sides of the hall blocked. We'll have to take the window. Go!" He pulled everyone to their feet and blocked the door with a chair. Ulrich propped the window open and jumped out to help the others. He pulled Yumi through, who froze as soon as she touched the ground.

"Yumi," yelled Ulrich, "You're blocking the window!" She remained frozen, looking toward the sky. Ulrich looked to see what she saw.

A swarm of hornets settled on the building, blocking any chance of escape. A wave of energy erupted from the swarm, and Ulrich tried to reach and catch Yumi before he fell himself, unconscious.

Yumi opened her eyes, then closed them to fend off a pounding headache. She pushed it to the back of her mind and sat up. She was on a bare concrete floor at the center of a large room. It looked like the factory, but there were no windows to be seen. Just the floor, the walls, and a faint light coming from nowhere. She saw Ulrich beside her, along with Jeremie, Odd, Aelita, and the others. She stood and examined the room. It was immensely wide and long, and the ceiling was almost completely hidden in darkness.

Ulrich stirred, and she ran over to help him up. "Where am I?" he asked.

"I don't know," she replied. They went to each of the others as they all awoke.

"Well, now what do we do?" asked Beth.

Jeremie shrugged. "I guess we just wait."

They sat there for a good five minutes or so before they heard a sound come from beside them. A hidden door opened in one of the walls, and through it stepped a dark, imposing figure.

"Ah, I'm glad to see you are all awake. I would have hated for any of you to have missed this." The man spoke slowly, with an evil grin crossing his face. Yumi shrank back from the figure dressed in black.

"You." Ulrich rose slowly and stepped towards him.

"Ah, you recognized me. I was afraid I'd have to introduce myself all over again."

"No need. You attacked Yumi. You attacked everyone." Ulrich ran towards the man, readying himself for an attack when suddenly he stopped in mid-stride.

"Oh, my. We can't have you losing your head like that. It's very uncool."

"Let go of me!"

"No, I don't think I will. As for the rest of you..." he turned to the others. "You see, the only one of you I need is dear little Yumi here. Why don't you all just hang around, if you get my meaning." He waved his hand and everyone except Yumi began to rise, reaching to pull away the invisible hands at their throats.

"Stop it!" screamed Yumi. "You're choking them!"

X.A.N.A. smiled. "My dear, that's the idea." He took long strides toward her,

grabbing her before she could get away. He pulled her to her feet by the arm.

Yumi glared at him. "What do you want?"

"What I want? I want what you took from me."

Yumi searched her mind for anything she could think of. Since she had lost her memory, the only things she had were given to her from her parents or her grandfather. It was all normal stuff, nothing he would want. She searched for some clue of what he wanted.

X.A.N.A. only laughed. "No, no. Nothing like that. You really don't remember, do you? Well, let me see if I can jog your memory." He let go of her arm and threw her friends to the floor.

"Do you remember anything of the night you shut down the supercalculator, Yumi?"

She shook her head. "No. Nothing until a few days after that."

"I see. Well, seeing as you have found your friends I'm sure they've caught you up to to that point. What you don't know is what happened right there. As a matter of fact, none of you do.

"When you went down to the supercalculator, I obviously knew what was going to happen. You had freed Aelita from my little 'virus' and there was nothing stopping you from shutting it down. I obviously realized that and came up with a plan to trick you all. I was going to take whoever touched the switch and swap myself with their mind. Once I was in their body I would continue turning off the supercalculator. That person would die instead of me, and I would live on in their body. It was really a brilliant plan, given the little time I had to come up with it.

"So, you all went ahead as you planned, and it turned out Yumi was the one to hit the switch. Everything was going as I planned. You touched the handle and I began the process of switching our minds. You managed, however, to move the switch to the 'standby' setting before I could finish. It ended up that I was stuck in the supercalculator with your memories and I was unable to do anything but wait until some idiot came along had everything switched back on. And, as ironic as it was, Jeremie happened to be that idiot."

Yumi stepped back. "you mean...you...TOOK my memories?"

"Yes, and that's all I had. I had your memories to be with for fifteen years. I watched them. I saw the friends you had. The family you had. And I hated it. You had all that, and you had the powers I had put in your mind. I had nothing."

Jeremie stood. "Powers? But...she hasn't shown any powers. My equipment would have registered them."

X.A.N.A. sneered. "Yes, well, she at least hasn't learned how to activate them. Now." He turned back to Yumi and pulled her close to him. He looked deep into her eyes as his started to glow. "Now I can take back what you stole from me, and then I will destroy you and your friends."

Yumi only stood there, held in his grasp as X.A.N.A. began the transfer. She felt things flashing before her eyes. Memories. Ideas. X.A.N.A.'s being. She saw the hate, the destruction, the power he wielded. She felt it being ripped from the back of her mind, and she could do nothing.

Ulrich started to move to save Yumi when he felt a sharp sting from behind. He turned to see dozens of kankrelats, hornets, and other creatures blasting through the walls and coming for him and the others. He began to run, searching for a weapon to fight them all. He saw Odd, jumping around like an acrobat grabbing onto monsters that got to

close and aiming them at other creatures. He ran to Jeremie and kicked away a block that was readying to fire.

Yumi knew all this was happening, but it was like a distant memory. It was outside of her reach. For her, now, there was nothing but the memories flying past her. She focused her attention on whatever she could latch on. X.A.N.A. Was giving back her memories in order to make room for what he was taking. She saw herself in class as teachers lectured on adjectives and derivatives and wars between peoples long dead. She saw herself at home, eating dinner with her family and wrestling her younger brother for saying she was lovesick for Ulrich. She saw herself sitting on the lawn of Kadic Academy with Jeremie, Odd and Ulrich, talking of classes and how they were going to save Aelita from Lyoko. She saw herself on Lyoko, dressed in a kimono and using her fan to destroy dozens of monsters over the years. She saw herself hanging over the edge of a rocky cliff with an infinite digital void below her, and she felt safe in that she knew that Ulrich had a hold of her hand, and that he would save her or die trying.

She focused her attention to the knowledge being pulled out of her mind. She tried to understand it, but nothing made any sense. It was written for a machine; her mind couldn't comprehend it.

“YUMI!!” Ulrich threw off a machine that had grabbed onto him and ran towards them.

X.A.N.A. threw up his hand. “No more interruptions,” he said as Ulrich rose off the floor, struggling to break loose of the invisible hold. “Now you die.” Ulrich gasped for air; he was choking.

Yumi struggled to break free and save her friend, but her mind was held still as X.A.N.A. drained it of the knowledge he desired.

“No.”

The voice came as though from another person. For a moment Yumi wondered who had said it.

“No.”

It was Yumi herself.

The anger in X.A.N.A.'s eyes turned to surprise for a second. “What did you say?”

Yumi used all of her strength to raise her arms. She pushed herself loose from X.A.N.A. She looked towards him and commandingly spoke, “I said no. No more hurting me. No more hurting Ulrich. No more hurting my friends. No.” With the last word, she raised her hand toward Ulrich, who settled gently to the floor, staring in amazement.

Yumi glowed radiantly. Her feet left the floor and she rose into the air.

Suddenly X.A.N.A. laughed, “What? You think you figured out how to use that power? It is beyond you. It will destroy you. There is no way you will defeat me, so don't even try.”

“Then why,” she asked, her stare piercing through him, “is there fear in your eyes?”

X.A.N.A. growled angrily and raised his arms high. The swarm of hornet monsters gathered behind him. He put his hand forward and the swarm of machines let forth a torrent of lasers.

“Yumi!” Ulrich stepped forward as the others caught up to him. Odd grabbed him to keep him out of the fire.

Yumi raised her hand, and the lasers stopped in midair. She motioned to the side and the lasers blasted into the floor, well away from anyone else. Again she raised both hands

toward the swarm.

“Enough,” she commanded. A wave of radiant energy erupted from her fingertips. As it engulfed the hornets they dissolved into metallic dust. The anger on X.A.N.A's face turned into ashen fear.

“No!” he begged. “You...you can't just destroy me!”

Yumi glowed brighter. “Destroy you? No. You will not be entirely destroyed. You will be sent back from where you came.” A snaking beam of energy crossed over to him and engulfed him. A bright flash and explosion erupted, and he was suddenly gone.

Everything was suddenly silent. Yumi sank to the floor and collapsed; Ulrich ran to catch her. His hands burned as he touched her, and now she was almost too radiant to see.

Her breath was labored. “He's right. It's too much. I can't control it.”

“Yumi?” Ulrich grasped tighter, wincing at the pain.

“I took it all. Too much. Now I'm losing it.”

“Yumi! Don't—”

“Maybe... Let me go. I think I can...” She pulled free from Ulrich and struggled to her feet. She stretched out her arms and once again rose into the air. The air around her shimmered, the light expanding to fill the room. Ulrich and the others closed their eyes to shield them from the overpowering energy. He felt waves of energy running through him; everything seemed to pulsate with them. He found himself losing consciousness, and the whisperings of a song crept into his thoughts.

As Ulrich regained consciousness, he was blinded by a bright light coming from the ceiling. Looking away from it, he saw three cylindrical chambers reaching almost to the ceiling. On his other side he saw Yumi kneeling over him with a relieved smile now that he had awoken. Something, however, seemed different, and he studied her carefully to see what it was. He jumped as he realized it: This was not the Yumi that had lived in Japan for fifteen years, nor the Yumi that defeated a squadron of hornet drones with a hand gesture. It was the Yumi of fifteen years prior, whom he had fought alongside in the battle to keep X.A.N.A. from destroying the world.

The question was still forming as he spoke. “What...?”

Yumi grinned sheepishly. “Well, I had to do *something* with all that power, and I thought, 'Wouldn't it be great if none of this had ever happened?' and it just happened. I didn't really mean to send us *that* far back, but I kinda lost control at the end and—” Suddenly she grabbed Ulrich and pulled him to her. Tears streamed down her face.

“I forgot you!” she cried. “And then I remembered, and that made it just hurt even more that I had forgotten you. I never want to forget. Never!”

Ulrich said nothing but put his arms around her, holding her gently. Eventually she calmed down. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” she said. “I'll be fine.” She looked up into his eyes. They drew closer.

Gears crunched to life as the elevator door slid open. Ulrich and Yumi let go of each other guiltily and stood up as Jeremie stormed into the room. Odd followed lazily behind.

“There you guys are! We're all suddenly dropped here in the factory fifteen years back and I'm all worrying about where you two might have gone and you're just down here talking or whatever you're doing.” Yumi was glad he didn't seem to notice the tears on her face. She brushed them off and gave him a sarcastic grin.

“Well,” she playfully snapped, “I’m sorry I’m not as good at this whole time travel thing as you are. I’ll do better next time.”

Yumi sat down beside Ulrich on the large leather sofa. They were in a rented house right on the edge of the French coast. She sat her cup of tea on the table beside her.

“So, how have you been?” asked Ulrich. He glanced over to a recliner where Odd was slowly sinking into the cushions. Odd’s long hair was falling over his face.

“Oh, you know, same old same old. First record is doing well, second’s about done.”

Yumi glared at him. “I still don’t think it’s right to be using what you know of the future to land record deals.”

“Okay! Here we go!” called Aelita. “Dinner is served.”

Odd raised a suspiciously amused eyebrow. “Well this should be interesting.”

Aelita pouted in a mocking response. “Hey, cooking’s not *that* hard. It’s only science.”

“The fact that you actually believe that,” Odd replied, “is what scares me. Cooking is *art*.”

“Yeah, and your crazy concoctions are masterpieces?”

“Exactly.”

Jeremie peeked through the door from the dining room. “Hey would you guys quit arguing and get in here so I can eat?”

Aelita stuck her tongue out at Odd. “See? He appreciates it.”

“Just cause you make him.”

“Okay, guys,” Ulrich cut in, “let’s just go and try it before passing judgment, alright?”

They all stood and walked into the dining room except Yumi, who went over to the window to see the sun setting over the ocean.

Ulrich called to her, “You coming?”

“Yeah,” she replied. “Just a minute.”

“Okay, but don’t forget about us.”

Yumi smiled and down into her tea. “I won’t,” she whispered.