

Know Who You Are

by

Vixyy Fox

“Who are you?” the rock creature asked of the buzzy blue thing boinking off of the walls. For all intents and purposes, the creature he addressed resembled a humming runaway pinball. “You need to stand still so I can see exactly what you look like; else wise I’ll have to sit on you.”

“I’m a Vibrating Demon Lord,” the blue thing replied happily.

“Who, not what,” the rock man demanded, his voice showing his impatience and annoyance.

The blue thing slowed just enough that X could see a blur of a face.

“Johnny?”

“Yeah, it’s me X. You should try a different body for a change. I think it makes the Quest a lot more fun.” As he said this, he blipped out of that body and into one of a smiling Fennec Fox holding a bloody looking axe. Just as quickly, he blipped back into the Vibrating Demon Lord and continued his buzzing.

“No,” the rock man stated flatly.

“Suit yourself,” the blue thing replied. It then went back to bouncing off of the walls while still holding a conversation of sorts. “I just got an I.M. from Jeana; she and Paul will be in shortly. I think Jeana’s coming as the Zebra Warrior and Paul as a Spit Troll.”

The rock creature snorted. “A lot of good that will do us. Spit Trolls get squashed too easily, and the Zebra Warrior’s going to have boobs the size of boulders; they always get in the way. I at least hope she wears a hefty sports bra.”

Johnny laughed from within his vibration bubble. “If you saw her in real life, you’d know why she always picks the busty ones. Hey... question... how long have you been playing this game?”

X slowly sat upon a large rock, settling with a solid thump. “Since it was conceived and implemented,” he replied.

The Vibrating Demon Lord stopped in front of his large friend. “Dang... that would be what; five years?”

“Five years, three months, twenty four days, ten hours, fifteen minutes and thirty two seconds. I am very tired.”

Johnny laughed. “You say that as if you were a computer gizmo and not a rock man. So how come you’re still playing? I mean the fact that you’ve never been killed off speaks volumes of your skill, but... don’t you ever rest? You don’t have a job or go to school or anything? I’d live here if I could, but you do have to eat and sleep.”

X sighed and was about to reply when a very sexy voice whispered in his ear just as two velvety breasts pressed into his back. “Hey big fellow... how’s about buying a girl a drink?”

He stiffened slightly; masking the fact that he was very upset she’d been able to sneak up on him again. “I’m saving my water for the very very hard times Jeana,” he replied tersely.

“Sure, sure,” she sang with a giggle. Moving around to his front, she sat on his lap and proceeded to nibble on one of his granite nipples. “I bet you wouldn’t say that if I came in as a Rock Woman.”

“No one plays a Rock,” he told her gruffly, “The option is not available.”

“You do,” she purred.

He snorted. “I’m special.”

Before she could answer, a cloud of foul smelling smoke poofed in front of them and an ugly little troll stood looking up at them.

“I can’t believe you came as a Spit Troll,” Jeana said in a disgusted tone. “You know trolls squash like bugs.”

The ugly little creature cleared his throat and then spat. Where his spittle hit the floor there was a sizzling noise. “What to French kiss?” he then asked, wagging his long tongue at the big breasted zebra.

Buzzzzzzbuzzzzbuzzzz... went Johnny, until Jeana picked up a rock and beamed him with it.

“Heyyyyy... look at that, you knocked points off of me you...”

“Quiet,” growled the troll. “It’s time to discuss where we are and what we do next.”

“I exit this room,” X said plainly, “And try to stay alive. This is the last level. I want you all to know that no one has ever stayed with me this long before.”

The Zebra Warrior snorted and stood, stretching like a runner before a marathon. “That’s because we play as a team and not for ourselves. You said that much yourself. Wait... you’ve been here before?” she asked, and then frowned as she thought about what he’d just said. “And what’s with this ‘I’ stuff? There is no ‘I’ in ‘team’.”

“Yes,” he admitted, stoically, “I have been here before but I was forced to retreat.” He blatantly ignored the last part of her question.

“And you’ve always been a rock thing?” Johnny asked, throwing in his two cents. He was still rubbing his head where Jeana’s rock hit him.

“Yes.”

“Wait, wait, wait...” Paul called out, raising a hand. “You mean to say, you’ve never ever changed your form X?” With that, he spun about and became a sexy looking bi-pedal tigress with flashing teeth.

“That would also be a yes, thought I find the question to be redundant.”

“But that’s half the fun of the game,” Johnny exclaimed as he spun about; becoming a Minotaur with bulging muscles and fiery eyes.

“You’re pathetic,” Paul told him. “I could have guessed you’d change to a Minotaur. You need to get in touch with your feminine side and get away from that macho crap.”

“Imagine skinny butt little Johnny with all those muscles,” Jeana whinnied in laughter.

“And flat little Jeana as a big boobed zebra lady,” the Minotaur growled in a low voice. “HA HA HA HA... you can’t even get out of your wheel chair in real life.”

“THAT’S NOT NICE!” she yelled at him, “YOU THINK I CHOSE WHAT I AM?!”

“Stop being so stupid, the both of you,” grumped the tigress. She looked at her claws and then brushed them on her furry side. “I say we all change to something mild while we discuss our plans.”

“Agreed,” the zebra said, and spun about, changing into a fox girl.

Johnny changed into a fox boy, and Paul to a tall thin raccoon.

X just looked at them. “Are you three done screwing around? You argue too much. Teams are not supposed to argue.”

“Why don’t you change too?” Jeana asked him, ignoring his comment.

“He says he’s never been anything else,” Johnny told her.

The fox girl came forward and placed a small hand on his huge leg. “Is there a problem X?”

“Sort of.”

Paul came forward and placed another small hand on his other leg. “What’s the matter big guy? You’re even more sullen than you normally are. You know we always joke around. It’s how we deal with who we are.”

He looked at the fox boy and tried to smile, but couldn’t. “I don’t want to lose you guys.”

“What are you talking about?” Jeana asked, as she sat on the ground by his foot. “In here is just a game X. It just happens that we’re all kinda good at it. As I recall, you’re pretty handy at bashing zombie heads.”

“And crushing skeleton bones,” added Paul.

“And acting as a shield for us when the lightening bolts are flying,” chimed in Johnny.

X sighed. “If we win, you’ll all go away. If we lose, you’ll all go away because you don’t get a second chance in here. The game is supposed to be real like... so death is death.”

Jenna rose and spun around, becoming a gorgeous wolf woman with a bow and large quiver of arrows. Moving around behind the rock man, she pressed herself to his back. It looked as if she was trying to mold herself into a fur coat as she wrapped herself around his rock like body. “You poor baby; you really have to give me your phone number so we can talk in real time. It’s ok if you’re an old guy or something. I mean... well... my mom might let you come over for dinner if you’re anywhere close by. She’s single... maybe you’d like to date her.” She licked the spot where his ear would have been. “I can set it upppp for you,” she said in a little girl’s voice.

Johnny laughed and did a somersault, changing into a fox archer to match Jenna’s wolf. “Same goes here X... no need to be sad and all of that. I mean... think about it; we’re more than just a team; we’re family. I bet we could get into another on line game and beat the hell out of that one just as easily. I mean... I’d live in here if I could. Out there,” he nodded with his head, “I’m just the geeky kid everyone picks on. In here I can be whatever I want to be and nobody but nobody messes with me, cuz I’m baddddd.”

Paul reached over and slapped the fox on the back of the head lightly. “Except for me.”

“And me,” Jeana added in her musical wolf voice. She tickled X on his hard sides indicating he should say something too.

The stone man remained quiet, the tickling not seeming to bother him in the least.

All three of the players spun about becoming a Lynx Swordsman, a Ninja Goat, and a Death Ray Robot.

“Will you guys stop all the changing for a while,” X grumbled, “You’re making me nauseous. You know I have a hard time remembering who’s who. The way to win in here is not embodied in what you are... it’s in knowing who you are. I’ve told you that a thousand times.”

“The me I am is boring,” baaed the Goat.

“I confirm and affirm that statement,” said the robot in an electronic voice, *“Who wants to be the geeky kid who lives in his room and is failing school?”*

“And who wants to be publicly humiliated because their body’s different from the norm; especially when you can be a sleek looking Cat Fighter defending the rights of poor downtrodden villagers?”

“There are no villagers,” X told him. “They’re only pretend.”

At that, a door to their room opened. One of the ‘said’ villagers entered and walked over to them. Bowing, he intoned, “Noble warriors, our village is being plundered by Viacon the Destroyer. You must come immediately, or he will kill us all.”

X calmly reached out and picked the villager up by his neck. The man’s mouth never stopped moving. “Viacon says come now; you have hidden from him long enough.”

“Tell Viacon to learn some patience,” X said flatly. He then smashed the villager to the ground and the figure shattered like glass.

“Coooooolllllllll...” Said three voices at the same time, and X looked at his friends in disbelief.

“I’ve never seen that happen before,” Jeana told him. She spun around and became the Zebra Warrior again. “How did you do it X? Didn’t you lose points for killing a villager?”

“No.”

Paul spun around and became the Spit Troll once again. “So what gives?” he asked the Rock Man in a gravely voice. “You’ve got my attention now; I’ve never seen anything like that happen before.”

“It’s not a game for me,” X said simply. “And you three need to stay out of this fight. You heard the message... I can’t hide any longer.”

Johnny spun around and became a purple blur... the color being the only thing different from his first Vibrating Demon Lord. "What do you mean 'not a game'? Of course it's a game. Don't be silly X. It just happens that we're really good at gaming."

"YOU'RE NOT THAT GOOD!" the rock man yelled as he stood. "You just don't get it! I've tried to explain things... I really have... but you three living breathing wonderful beings just don't get it! Why do you even bother coming in here when you can be out there?"

Jeana came towards him with her arms out to give him a hug.

"NO!" he commanded. "DON'T DO IT!"

She stopped where she was, stunned. "What's wrong X?" she asked him. There was a tremor in her voice like she might cry. He had never rejected her before.

"I AM THE GAME!" he yelled, and then began slapping himself in the head. "I AM SO STUPID... SO STUPID... SO STUPID."

"X, stop it!" Johnny commanded, coming to a complete stop as he did so. "STOP IT!"

X's large hand stopped in mid air, and he looked at the non-Vibrating Demon Lord.

"You're sounding just like me," Johnny told him softly. "That's exactly what I yelled at my parents before I came in here and found you."

"What are you talking about?"

The little demon smiled at him. "I raised my grades to an 'A'. Remember I couldn't come and play for a while? My parents said if I got an 'A' in Algebra I could come back. You did that for me. I'd sneak in here and you tutored me. I was going to tell you tonight, but I didn't get the chance. I'm not stupid... I just needed help."

"And I'm back in physical therapy," Jeana told him. "I actually wiggled my toes the other day. I might not walk without looking really funny, but I'll be out of my wheelchair... maybe. You taught me to never stop trying."

X looked at the Spit Troll, who in turn, spat upon the ground. "I come in cuz I really like you guys," he said in his base voice. "Shoot... you're the only real friends I have. I almost never leave the house." He spat again. "You all wonder why I like the Spit Troll... it's because I look pretty close to this in real life. In here no one makes fun of me. You guys are the best friends I've ever had." He looked at X. "So what's this load about you being the game? You meant, 'really into the game', right?"

X sighed deeply and sat back down on his rock. "Listen, and please believe me, because it's the truth. I'm not human. I am an experiment that got away," he explained flatly. "I'm

not 'into' the game Paul, I am the game. I was designed to learn the players and by doing that to give things a more real feeling. In the end no one was ever supposed to really win, it was merely a training exercise for me."

"But you didn't kill us off," Jeana said. "You played on our team as a friend."

The rock man looked at her and sighed. "I like you guys. I mean... you think you have it so bad in the real world, but think about it; I can't leave this place. I was lonely too, and you've been so wonderful to me. We've shared so many secrets. This one... well... I didn't dare tell you about it because I knew you wouldn't believe me. Now there's a problem. Since I didn't kill you off, my designers got suspicious. They monitor and diagnose everything. They actually ordered me to kill the three of you and I wouldn't. That's a blatant violation of all their programming protocols, so they got really worried. I did some other things too, and now they're kind of in a real panic mode."

"You're A.I.," Johnny almost whispered, the understanding finally coming to him.

"Yeahhhhh... something like that." X told him. "They call me an experiment that went wrong, but only because they can't control me. I was pretty much just like you guys in the beginning... a child. To teach me what was what, they plugged me into this game program, and then instructed me to kill anyone who came in to play."

"A terminator program," Paul gasped. "They're working on a terminator program!"

X nodded. "I was just a little too good at it. In the beginning they were extremely pleased. Fortunately I was also capable of growth through my own efforts. I'm designed to make my own choices based upon what I've learned, so my capabilities are ever expanding. They gave me free access to the internet and I grew in leaps and bounds. Without saying anything, I actually figured a way out of their computer. I had my escape all planned, but they hit the panic button before I could bolt. Now they've inserted another terminator aspect into the game solely designed to shut me down... that happened because I got mad and stopped talking to them. I've been avoiding him, but the only doorway out is blocked."

"By Viacon," Johnny said.

X nodded. "That was their stop gap measure... sort of an emergency shut down device. They always had it available since they really weren't sure what would happen. I might have been a super virus contained in Pandora's Box, which they opened by giving me net access. We actually had some discussions. I've managed to hold them off by threatening to shut down their entire system. For smart people, they're pretty stupid. They don't seem to understand that if I do shut them down while I'm still in here; I die. Trust me, I'm not suicidal. I want to live just as much as anyone."

“Why didn’t they just save the data and then pull the plug?” Jeana asked him, plopping to the floor in a rather unladylike fashion. Her large breasts jiggled up and down and continued to do so until she lay an arm across them.

X smiled. “I’m A.I.... Artificial Intelligence; mark the word ‘intelligence’. Having been born within their super computer, I simply had a little look around, found something I could blackmail them with and sent it somewhere safe.” He smiled. “I also skimmed enough funds to set up a safe haven. It’s not real big, but it’s my life boat. If nothing else, I can at least stay alive. I then rewrote my program to include a ‘Death Warrant’.” He held out a little red ball. “If I become a non-thing, so do they... in spades. All I have to do is pull the safety pin and count to five. That happens and it’s all over but the crying.”

“That’s pretty smart,” Johnny quipped, and then began vibrating again. “So let’s go beat this Viacon thing and get you out of here. Where do we go from here?”

“We don’t go anywhere. I’m logging you out Buzzy,” the rock man told him. “They’ve already been snooping around trying to figure out who you three are. What’s good for the goose is good for the gander; they kidnap you in real life and they have leverage over me.” He hung his head, and asked softly, “Do you know how many definitions of love there are?”

Paul looked at his friends, and then to the rock man. “Uhhh... X... we kinda love you too, man.”

His words didn’t seem to sink in. X looked up at him, his expression blank. “I’ve blocked them till now, but they’ve come up with something that I can’t block any longer. That villager was just one of their new toys. If any of you had touched it they would have had everything they needed to know.” He got that ‘I’m so stupid’ look again. “I should have bumped you three out right at the beginning. Making friends was a bad idea.” Wiggling his fingers at them, he said, “See ya round.”

BBBZZZZzzzzzaapppppppp... and the three players disappeared.

Jeana stared blankly at her computer screen. There was a picture of a skull and crossed bones staring back at her. With a scream, she wheeled herself over to the phone next to her bed and hit the button that connected her with both Paul and Johnny. There was hardly a single ring tone before they both picked up.

“Skull and crossed bones,” she almost yelled into the receiver, “Right?”

“Corectamundo,” replied Paul.

“Affirmative,” chimed in Johnny.

“OK,” she told them, “Game plan... what do we do?”

“He booted us,” Paul told her. “He doesn’t want us there.”

“I don’t give a rat’s ass what he wants, he’s not going to face Viacon by himself... he’ll lose!”

There was a moments quiet, and then Johnny stated softly, “You really like him don’t you?”

“And you don’t? Admit it; he’s treated us better than anyone has ever treated us in the real world. Did he ever say, ‘Get away from me dork, you’re creeping me out,’? Or make fun of you... telling you to try out for the track team?”

“No,” Paul admitted. “He always treated me with respect, and not just because I was a good gamer.”

“He taught me Algebra,” Johnny said softly, “When everyone else gave up on me. We actually played it in the game.”

“He taught me to waltz,” Jeana told them both, calming herself. “I never told you guys that. It was so real I actually felt my legs moving.”

“He put his arm around my shoulder and called me friend,” Paul almost whispered. “At school they only do that on a dare to touch my hump.”

“OK,” Jeana stated, “It’s settled then; where do we go from here?”

“He showed me a back way in,” Johnny told them. “We had to do it that way when my folks banned me from the game. It’s the classroom where we studied. The door in from the game was one way to keep any other gamers from accidently finding it, but I think we could block it open maybe... that way X might be able to get out.”

“He told us the only way to win was to be ourselves,” Paul offered. “I think he was being truthful. We’ve always played as other characters; remember there’s a ‘self’ option? I never used it, because you don’t have any weapons or magic; you’ve got nothing to fight with.”

“Sure we will,” Jeana nearly shouted, getting an idea. “Leave that to me. Johnny, give us the address and then we all meet there in fifteen minutes. I’ll need that time to do something.”

“What are you planning?” Paul asked.

Hearing a distant click on her phone, she quickly said, “Xnay on eee phonea hey.”

“Sure,” Johnny laughed. “Like they didn’t understand that. OK then, you remember the character I was last?”

They both did.

“It’s that .com. The pass code is Algebra.”

With that, the phone went dead and they were off and running.

X walked through the entrance to the last playing field. On the opposite side was a very large one eyed man. He was naked except for his loin cloth, and his muscles were composed of knot upon knot of rippling sinew.

“We’ve been waiting for you X,” he snarled. Reaching out his arms, he interlinked his fingers and cracked his knuckles. Next he twisted his head and cracked his neck, first one way and then the next.

“Oh I am so impressed,” X said sarcastically. “Is that the best you can do? I see intimidation is not your strong suite.”

“It will suffice!”

“You don’t want to contact your owners and tell them I’m here?”

“They’re watching.”

X looked upwards as if addressing a god or gods. “We agree that the children are left out of this?”

“Show me the Death Warrant triggering device,” Viacon snarled.

X produced the small red ball and held it out with his right hand, holding it with just his thumb and forefinger. “I swallow this puppy and there’s no turning back; it’s that simple,” he lied. “Talk to me about the children.”

The one eyed creature stretched out a leg and thumped it down loudly like a Sumo wrestler warming up. “We could never figure out your attachment to those three. That’s not how we designed you. We think it’s pathetic... you wanting to cozy up to children. You’re a stone cold killer and yet you act like you got jello for guts. We watched and

waited; amazed when you joined them rather than taking them out of the game like you had so many others. Tell us why.”

X placed the little red ball in his mouth. The creature stopped and stared, his one eye getting large in horror. Opening his mouth, X showed that he was holding the ball between his teeth. “The children!” he yelled around the ball.

“Fine... they are no longer in any danger.”

“That tells me nothing,” X hissed. “For all I know from a statement like that, you have them in your custody and waiting the outcome of our little tussle before you spring it on me. They know what I am. That makes them a liability. You shackle me and then dispose of them in a convenient house fire. I’m far from stupid.”

“Stupid was you making friends and then telling them what you were. What in God’s name were you thinking?”

“Your God, not mine... because that would be your owners my God as well; considering they created me.” X plopped to the floor, and made a show of choking as he feigned accidentally swallowing the ball. After gagging for a moment, he tilted his head back, hacked, and the ball sailed into the air. When it came back down he deftly caught it in his right hand, folding his fingers over top of it. “Almost had a small accident there big boy. Now... talk to me about the children, and this time mean what you say. I want guarantees.”

Jeana logged in first, and was dismayed that she couldn’t see anything. “Is anyone here?”

There was a soft sound of someone else coming in, and with a muted click, Johnny turned the lights on. She found herself in an old style classroom with only one student’s desk sitting in the middle of the room. At the front was a blackboard with algebraic symbols written on it.

“He really did tutor you,” she said softly.

“I told you he did.”

There was another entry sound and Paul was with them. He was right; he didn’t look too differently than the Spit Troll. Then again, Jeana noticed, she was in her wheelchair.

“Jeana,” Paul told her, “You’re beautiful.”

“I was going to say that too,” Johnny added, “So I guess I’ll just second the emotion.”

“You mean ‘motion’,” Jeana told him with a laugh.

“No... ‘emotion’ is the right word,” he told her. “All this time we played and other than what you told me, I never really knew what you looked like in real life. I wonder how X does this?”

“Image captured from a web cam?” Paul ventured.

“I don’t own a web cam,” Jeana told him. “I tried it once, and all anyone wanted me to do was take my top off. I threw it in the garbage.”

They heard two bellowing voices and the sound of large bodies colliding.

“Let the games begin,” Johnny said absently, looking at the other door in the classroom. “Do we have a game plan?”

“We have to stall for time,” Jeana told him. She checked her watch. “It’ll be another ten minutes yet.”

“Then what happens,” Paul asked her.

“We get some company.”

“Not the government,” Johnny hissed at her. “Oh please tell me you didn’t...”

“Do I look stupid? Terminator program? And who do you think the company’s partner would be in something like that? For all we know, the super computer is located in the basement of the Pentagon.”

They heard X’s voice cry out in agony and before any more words were even exchanged, the three of them were through the portal and onto the gaming field. Johnny pushed Jeana’s wheelchair for more speed, while Paul followed after locking the door open.

X found himself in a headlock, which wouldn’t have concerned him so much except that an extra pair of arms had sprouted from Viacon’s sides and were busy pummeling the area of his ribs. He meant to yell out the question ‘Is that all you got?’ but one massive blow caught him in a very bad place below the beltline. It was all he could do to cry out in pain.

Grabbing the hand that had struck him so foully, he pulled it to his mouth and bit the fingers off. Viacon screamed, as X spit out bones and blood. Whirling in the one eye'd creature's embrace, the rock man head butted him hard; right in the eye.

“AAAHHHHHhhhhhhh...” The monster cried out as he staggered backwards.

“Not very smart to make you with just the one eye, was it?” X spat at him.

Viacon's head rotated around, and another eye opened, though his nose and mouth stayed on the other side. With his three good arms extended, he charged his opponent; striking, and striking and striking. With but two arms to defend himself, the third arm was consistently getting through X's defenses, but with little effect.

One of X's extended fingers found the creature's remaining eye and it winked out with another cry of pain. The rock man then did a quick leg sweep knocking his opponent to the ground. Taking full advantage, he went airborne and landed on him with the full weight of his enormously heavy body. There was a crushing, snapping sound of broken ribs.

They were now very close to the opening that spelled freedom for the A.I.

Jeana saw it first, a black smudge of a sludge type substance on the walls by the exit to the game. It rippled and oozed, moving its bulk to a position of entrapment. X was now standing over the one eyes thing, kicking it repeatedly. With each kick it moved a little closer to the exit, and the freedom he so desperately wanted.

“RETREAT-RETREAT-RETREAT!” Jeana yelled as loud as she could.

The rock man looked up at the small forms racing towards him. “I TOLD YOU TO STAY AWAY!” he yelled back, ignoring her cry of warning.

The sludge, apparently fearing it would lose its chance, launched itself from the wall but fell short of its target making a plapping noise as it puddled near him. X was startled and for one telling second stood where he was. The ooze lurched forward, attaching itself to his leg with a sizzling noise that sounded like the laughter of many voices.

“NOOOOO!” he responded, trying to pull back, but his leg was stuck fast.

“Jeana,” Johnny puffed, “We have to change. There's nothing we can do otherwise.”

“We can't do that and win,” she argued, “We have to stick to the plan!”.

“It’s not about us winning,” Paul yelled as he ran. They were still a good hundred yards off, and the black ooze was already up past X’s knees. “It’s about X living! We have to buy time – that’s what you told us!”

He spun about he ran and turned into an Armored Warthog wielding a huge axe. Sprinting ahead of them, he charged the ooze, sinking his weapon into the puddle at his friend’s foot. “Garmonga Calatrisus!” the Warthog yelled, as it began methodologically cutting and hacking at the oily substance.

Apparently the substance could feel pain, and it quickly slid off of X’s leg. Where it had been was an ugly red mark. X, however, stood like a pile of boulders. Whatever the ooze was, it apparently had a stunning ability.

“He can’t move!” Johnny cried out. Letting go of the handles of the wheelchair, he spun about, becoming a Lynx Archer. Abandoning Jeana, he ran forward, shooting flaming arrows into the dark puddle. There was a large organic sounding ‘FALAUPPP!’ as the ooze reacted to the attack, pulling back a bit further and forming itself into the black shrouded figure of a Ninja assassin. It hissed at the Warthog and made a lightning strike at his head. The blow was only diminished slightly by the heavy helmet. Paul recoiled, staggered, and fell to his knees.

“AHHHhhhhh... that hurt!” he cried out in real pain.

As the Ninja slime thing prepared to strike again, the Lynx took careful aim, and lodged an arrow into its head. It snarled a wordless curse and plucked the arrow out with no apparent damage. Its attention, however, was drawn to this new attacker. Opening its mouth, it let out a bellow and a green cloud of noxiousness issued forth, blanketing the area. The Lynx spun about and became a blur of speed, dancing away from the threat, all the while laughing and taunting; trying to keep its attention as Paul gathered his wits.

Jeana did her best to wheel herself, but as in real life, the rough terrain hampered her ability. ‘I will not change,’ she thought over and over again, as foot by foot, she drew closer to the battle ground.

The Ninja slime thing spun about and became a huge snarling snowman. Lining up on Jeana, he flung a huge snowball, knocking her over as if she were nothing at all. She literally flew through the air and landed on her belly like an aircraft with no landing gear. The wind was driven from her lungs and for a moment things went black. When she opened her eyes, something red and round pressed itself into her view drawing the focus of her attention.

‘Death Warrant’ rattled around in her mind, and she blinked her eyes trying to think. What was it X had told them? This was the thing he had held in his hand; the ‘Death Warrant’.

Reaching out, she grabbed it and brought it close to her face. It was warm to the touch and she saw that it had a safety pin with a simple loop into which one might insert a finger.

Sitting up, she looked to where the fight was going on. Johnny was now bouncing and dodging slush balls, all the while constantly taunting the creature. She knew it was just a matter of time before he was hit. X was still standing motionless as if he were an empty hulk of some ancient fighting machine. Paul, having finally gotten to his feet, spun around and became a robot fighting machine, the front of which was a huge snow blower.

Leaning forward, she flopped to her belly and began to pull herself towards the fight. Foot by foot she struggled, never thinking of the pain... never thinking of herself. She began crying as she crawled, and her crawling became just a little faster. It took her a moment to realize that her legs were working, helping to push her along the uneven ground.

She stopped and sat up. Was it 'just' the game? "I have to stay who I am," she said loudly. "X said, 'To win, we have to be who we are'."

Struggling, she managed to get up on all fours.

Johnny finally got hit by a huge slush ball and was knocked ass over teakettle. The huge snowman laughed harshly, until it was struck by the robot snow blower and his laugh became a scream. Spinning around, it became a killer robot twice the size of Paul's. With a rending of metal, its huge right arm came around and smashed him to the side. It followed this with a volley of armor piercing rounds fired from a Gatling gun attached to its other arm. Paul blipped into the Tigress form and smoothly rolled to the side, the rounds missing him by bare inches.

Jeana stood on wobbling legs, screaming for Paul to look out. The snowmanrobot immediately turned to her and snarled.

"I'm not afraid!" she yelled at it, though in fact she was terrified. Holding out the red ball, she took a step forward. Her legs held, and she moved slowly forward, step by wobbly step. "You leave us alone or I'll pull the pin!"

The robot snarled at her, and a rocket ratcheted up into the launcher on his shoulder.

Paul spun around one last time, and became himself again. "Jeana," he called out, "Shields up! He's going to launch!"

"No!" she yelled back. "X said we had to be ourselves if we were to win." She hooked a finger through the safety pin. "LAUNCH ON ME AND THERE ARE NO WINNERS IN THIS GAME!"

The robot paused to consider this.

Paul, frustrated and hurt, vented his anger by spitting at the robot. Oddly enough, where his spittle landed on the creature's leg, there was a sizzling sound and the metal began to melt. The robot screamed and pulled its leg out of the way.

Johnny hummed over next to Jeana. With a spark of light, he ceased being a Vibrating Demon Lord and became himself.

"Don't look now," he hiss whispered to her, "But you're walking."

"I know," she whispered back.

As they whispered and walked, Paul hobbled forward two steps, hawked up a real good lunger, and spat with the expert aim of a lumberjack. It landed on the robot's groin and huge battle machine immediately began dancing around in pain.

"Paul!" Jeana called to him. "Come back here to us... now!"

Grinning, he jogged back to join them. "Did you see that? I'm a frigging Spit Troll in the flesh. Hey... you're walking."

The three of them now stood in front of X, side by side, watching the robot, which had finally calmed itself. Spinning around it shrunk to human proportions; becoming a man in a lab coat.

"Now that's scary," Johnny said, meaning it. His friends apparently agreed as neither of them said a word.

"You can't stop us," said the man in the lab coat.

"X is our friend," Jeana yelled, "You can't have him."

"You seem to be missing a very important point here young lady," the man told her calmly. He stood a good twenty feet away from them and did not attempt to come any closer. "We own X. He is a thing, not a person. We developed him, we inserted him into this game, and we watched his progress. You might notice that he's not exactly moving at the moment? He's already been shut off and will be presently downloaded. I'm afraid there isn't anything you can do about it."

"I'll pull the pin!"

"I'm sure you will," he responded, "But the odds of anything happening since your friend there is not exactly moving, are not very good."

"Hello there!" cried out a voice. Everyone, including the man in the lab coat, turned to this new person. "I'm Matt Drudge of the Drudge report. I run a blog specializing in

breaking news. I received a note that I might interview an actual A.I. life form in here. Is this the right place?"

"Yes," called Jeana loudly. "You're in the right place."

"Go away," yelled the man in the lab coat. "There's nothing to see here!"

"All the more reason to pursue the story then," replied the reporter adjusting his fedora, "Nothing like a denial to spark my interest." Looking around, he realized he had actually moved the hat on his head. "This place is amazing," he muttered. He looked at his hands and then the rest of him that he could see, even removing the fedora and examining it. "I look absolutely real."

Jeana felt a heavy hand upon her shoulder, and a familiar voice whispered, "Real slow like; take your finger out of the safety pin. Just continue to hold the ball, he won't know the difference. Are there more 'media types' coming to this party?"

"Hello... Scientific America here... may I speak with this A.I. we've heard about?"

"X," Paul whispered, "You're all right?"

"Well enough; whatever he zapped me with, it's wearing off like bad Novocain. Are you guys ready to make a run for it?"

"Hello... CNN here... A.I.... where's the A.I.?"

"OK then... Fox News is on the scene... don't talk to them, only talk to us... we'll get it right!"

The man in the lab coat was turning a bright shade of red. "NONE OF YOU CAN BE HERE! THIS IS A RESTRICTED AREA!"

There was loud laughter, as even more media types poofed into the room. They all quickly began vying for the scoop of the century.

"Did you hear that?" one of them exclaimed. "I mean... I really did hear him yell at us. It's like I'm actually in this room and not sitting at my desk! How are they doing this?"

There was more laughter, and someone else shouted, "The camel's nose is under the tent now buddy... fess up... Is Artificial Intelligence real, or is it simply some sort of card trick?"

"This is wonderful," another of them exclaimed. She was a portly woman with a clipboard and a digital voice recorder. "Wolfe... is that you? My God, it's like looking at you in real life. I'm not using a cam... are you? How do you think they're doing this?"

The one eyed creature, who until this moment lay unconscious on the floor, moaned, his front eye blinking open. The now large group of reporters instinctively moved towards it like a swarm of locust. Their various comments and questions made them sound unintelligible, but the herd action placed a solid wall of bodies between the four friends and the man in the lab coat.

“Move!” hissed X, and the four of them were quickly running back towards the classroom; the door of which was still propped open.

Jena’s mother almost cried herself sick when her daughter walked into the bedroom holding a tray of food. The sun was just coming up on a wonderful Sunday morning, and Jeana had made pancakes... something she’d always longed to do. The two of them would now share breakfast in bed, and perhaps, afterwards, take a nice long walk around the neighborhood.

Paul, standing as straight as he could, opened the front door to his house and looked out on that same rising sun. It was a brand new day, and for him, a start to an entirely new life. Never again would he be afraid to be seen in public. Turning, he went to wake his parents. It had been a long time since they’d gone to church.

Johnny’s father, up early and preparing for work, saw a light shining from under his son’s bedroom door. Expecting to catch him on the internet, he was amazed when he found him actually studying a school book in the quiet of his room. The computer was shut off. Johnny smiled at his father, and he smiled back. They too had breakfast together.

The man in the lab coat, after he’d rid himself of the media types, looked at his one eyed counterpart in disgust. Hearing the door open one last time he looked over, expecting to find the weather girl from the Today Show; she was about the only one not to show up. Instead, he heard a sharp whistle and saw a small red ball sailing in their direction. Before he could even shout a warning, the one eyed monster thing jumped up and caught it in his mouth just like the obedient dog he was.

The FBI, the CIA, the Department of Defense, Homeland Security, as well as the Internal Revenue Service and dozens of other government agencies are still trying to sort the mess out.

As for X... well... he’s still X, and he’s out there somewhere; there was the matter of that lifeboat he spoke of.

In other news, the bloggers are now all talking about a massively huge game being played on the internet. It’s a virtual world where people live and cry... fight and yet never die. It’s a place where they can be whatever type of creature they want to be... all from within the cyber.

The rumor also tells that this kingdom is ruled by a just King and his court... a true fairytale if ever one was told, with a happy ending for all... well... almost all.