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LOVE/SEX WARNING/DISCLAIMER:

This story depicts a love/sexual relationship between two consenting adult women. If you are under 18 years of age or if this type of story is illegal in the state or country in which you live, please do not read it. There are also a couple of instances of non consensual sex that happen in this story, so be forewarned. If depictions of this nature disturb you, you may wish to read something other than this story.

GROSS FACTOR/STRONG LANGUAGE DISCLAIMER:

If you've got a weak stomach and can't handle entrails, blood or dead bodies you might not want to read this story. While I don't think it's going to be too terribly violent there are a few places where the "ick factor" might take center stage. The God of War is kind of a pissy guy, ya know. There is also a lot of swearing in this tale. I don't know why- I'm not quite that foul mouthed personally, it just happened that way. I simply writes what the characters tells me to write and these characters have colorful imaginations with limited vocabularies.

JUST IN CASE I MISSED ANYTHING DISCLAIMER:

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Author's Note: This story takes place one hundred years after the story THE SEARCH FOR AMPHIPOLIS which took place six months after the story IS THERE A DOCTOR ON THE DIG which took place three weeks after the X:WP episode THE XENA SCROLLS.

This story is dedicated, with love, to my online buddies; and to my editors PyrateSka and Lisa Stevens. Thanks guys, I'm glad to have you in my corner :)

UberMadness
(The Battle For The Third Age)
By
BatMorda@aol.com
1997

If you were to kill me now right here
I would still look you in the eye
— Suzanne Vega

Prologue: The Year 2042

Xero smiled as her fingers moved across the sensory input pad. Arctic blue eyes watched lines of data scrolling across the top and bottom of her screen. It was a new security protocol by Hybrid Systems Inc. Running an absent hand through her long black hair, she studied the data carefully. Xero was at work. Paid to compromise and steal intellectual property, Xero was one of the best in the business. At twenty eight, she had fifteen years experience as a professional hacker, nettie, cyber thief, and virtual thug. Watching the two data streams simultaneously, she keyed the sequence to launch one of her own encryption programs. It would take a few moments to merge with the data stream, so Xero reached for her bottle of water and took a long decadent sip.

There was nothing quite like the taste of natural water, and Xero sighed as the cool liquid spilled down her throat. Sadly, she noticed her bottle was almost empty. It had been a gift from her roommate and business partner after a tricky job well done. Never taking her eyes from the screen, she saw the green flash as her program launched into operation. Xero proceeded to the next phase of her theft. After defining her search parameters, she let the retrieval program go, checking its progress with her watch, as well as the on screen chronometer.

As the seconds ticked down something at the top of the screen caught her eye. There had been a slight, almost imperceptible, lag in the data reading across the security field. Keeping her input strokes on the sensory pad consistent, Xero keyed the sequence to her personal trace-counterseek program. It was doubtful she'd been tapped by a syscop. It'd never happened before. But Xero knew all too well that there was a first time for everything.

There it was again; someone was definitely observing on her channel. She continued her work carefully. Since she hadn't downloaded any data she could only be hit with snooping charges. She kept her keystrokes steady her hands relaxed. If it was local security, they just might think she was with an MIS company, or an overworked employee doing routine maintenance. Her cyber-retriever flashed orange; it had the data. She could set it aside to download later, or continue with her theft. She was spared the decision when the watching entity made it's presence known.

Nice work Xero, the greeting flashed on her screen, gold text on a black background. Automatically Xero keyed the sequence to launch a tracer program.

Who are you? she replied, stalling for time.

An admirer, possibly an employer, came the immediate response.

Xero blinked in surprise. The tracer error message was unmistakable. Whoever was at the other end of the data line had heavy duty encryption. She read a few lines into the error subroutine and froze. The encryption had syscop data nodes. She'd been spotted by a netcop.

As you've no doubt discovered by now, I've got syscop access, the message flashed. *But I'm not interested in arresting you. Xero, I need your help. My keyword is Amphipolis. I'll meet you at--*

Xero launched her scrambler and cut the connection, cutting off the data stream mid-flow. Letting out a controlled breath, she launched her sanitation program and shut down the system. It was possible that if she'd been tapped she may have been given a worm. Virtual tapeworms were an effective tool cybercops used to identify hardware used in net heists and the compromise of intellectual property. A tiny data code impossible to find unless you knew what to look for, but

when activated could shut down entire systems, as well as forward transcripts of all net activity to the authorities.

“Hey, Xero. I’m back,” Bat called from the doorway. Xero could hear the distinctive sound of groceries being put away as various cupboards were opened and closed.

“Bat, get in here,” she called, “I’ve got a job for you.”

“What’s the problem?” Bat asked, navigating the various cables and link lines that littered the floor of the tiny living room.

“I just got tapped by a syscop. I need your eye to check out the system,” Xero said with a glance to the woman who had taken a seat next to her.

The most unusual thing about Bat was a black eye patch worn over her left eye. After a botched lens implant job, she’d decided on practicality over vanity. She’d gone to a gray market surgeon for a mechanical eye. Revolting to look at, it gave her an edge in hacking. In a business where every edge counted, this was a decided advantage. “A syscop?” Bat echoed, impressed. “No shit. Must’ve been a good one.”

“Not that good, I spotted them,” Xero replied. “I hope you didn’t have any plans tonight. I need you to go through my system, check for tapeworms. I still need to get this job done, cop or no cop.”

Bat nodded, understanding. She had no illusions about her role under Xero’s roof. She worked for the enigmatic woman, simple as that. Until her debt was paid off, Xero, for all intents and purposes, owned her. “No problem. Like I’ve ever got a date,” she muttered. “Why don’t you give me some space. If I’m going to disassemble the system, you’ll only be in the way. Go down to the ‘Horn. Get something to eat, relax, get laid.”

Xero watched as Bat pulled her long brown hair into a ponytail, pulling it through the back of her baseball cap. Already she could see the shorter woman planning which backup systems to use, what tools she’d need. “I thought that was what you were for?” she shot back goodnaturedly.

Bat frowned. “What? I don’t kick you out of my bed the two or three times you end up there drunk, and now I’m a dyke? Spare me.”

“You didn’t have any complaints at the time…” Xero stopped herself. She knew exactly why the other woman hadn’t complained. Bat was afraid of her. As one of the few *former* corporate systems managers turned hacker, Bat had a price on her head. People who worked corporate and then switched sides didn’t have long life expectancies. That was in fact how they’d met. On a rainy night, with two corporate security thugs at her heels, Bat had wandered into the Saddlehorn Pub & Grill. Desperate for a cover, she’d foolishly made a play for Xero and ended up in an entirely new line of work. Since then, she’d enjoyed the protection of Xero’s association, but also responded to the taller woman’s demands unflinchingly. “Sorry,” Xero mumbled, thinking she may have pushed the other woman too far.

“Shit, don’t worry about it,” Bat replied with a grin. “You know our deal. I worry about your hardware, you take care of your own software, so for chrissakes, go get some, will ya? You’ve been edgy as hell all week.” Xero grinned at that. The other woman got up and began to set up some diagnostic equipment. “Xero,” she continued as she worked, “I’d consider you a friend if I thought for a millisecond that you had any. This thing has obviously gotten you spooked. So take the night off and chill. Say ‘hi’ to everyone at the ‘Horn for me and by the time you get back, this rig will be running in top form.” Xero nodded, grabbing her leather jacket from the couch.

“Here,” Bat said, picking up a small mobile communications unit. “Take the mobie.” From a compartment on the bottom she extracted two tiny ear pieces. “Wear the wire, and if I’ve got any questions, I’ll let you know.”

“Sure,” Xero agreed, slipping the tiny receiver into her ear.

“Oh, and do me a favor, will ya?” Bat finished as Xero headed for the door. “If you see some good looking bobs tonight, for godsake get their number. It’s been so long since I’ve had a guy, I’m forgetting what being straight is all about.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Xero replied with a grin, pocketing the mobie unit and clipping the tiny phone to her jacket.

The Saddlehorn was unique even though it was only one of several hangouts frequented by hackers. Versus was a well known hacker bar, as were Fire Circle, The Chat House and Whipsters but they didn't have the mystique of the 'Horn. The Saddlehorn Pub & Grill was exclusive. The word was out that only the invited and initiated could congregate there, and those who ignored the warning usually found corrupted net accounts soon after an unwelcome visit. The clientele was also exclusively female. Not that it was a lesbian hacker bar per se, although at first blush that was what most people assumed. In addition to the usual crowd of hackers, the clientele also included those buyers who would procure their services. Only the most serious and determined buyers ended up at the 'Horn. Simply put, it was the place adopted by the best of the best. Even the managers of other bars spent time at the 'Horn. If you were female and good on the nets, you had to be there.

It wasn't an easy place to find, but Xero knew the route by heart. The 'Horn was more of a home for her than her apartment. Nodding to the bouncer, Bandit, she stepped through the door. The security light glowed green. She wasn't packing any weapons. Several unfortunate incidents with flamethrowers had made the precautions necessary, but Bandit did her job with unobtrusive efficiency. Quickly, her eyes adjusted to the dim light. The ancient battered saddle that hung over the bar was bathed in soft blue light today, reflecting the mood of the patrons gathered. It was a little on the early side, only nine thirty. The lights would be changed to red when the prowlers were out. A place to relax, make business deals, have a decent meal and cruise, the 'Horn was something different to everyone.

Xero made her way to a table in the back. Delirium and Addict, the bartenders nodded, and sent over the waitress to take her order. "A little early for you isn't it, Xero?" Ska Mayhem asked conversationally.

Xero glanced up favoring the waitress with a small smile. Fifteen years old and tough as nails Ska Mayhem was a recent escapee from the local "kid farm" and hung out with the hackers for protection. Too young to be legally working in a bar, she'd made her own IDs and impressed the owners enough to get the job. Now the rough denizens of The 'Horn were the closest thing to family she had. Even Xero, who made it a point not to get close to anyone, was not immune to the slim brunette's charm.

"I'll have a beer, make it a Buckner. Maybe dinner later, ask me then," Xero replied as she looked around. The small dance floor was vacant. Several women played darts at one end of the room. Credit codes exchanged hands after a decisive throw won the game. At a corner booth, Wordee, the resident film buff, sat with several other women. She recognized MaryD, but the other two she couldn't place.

"Where's your sidekick?" Ska asked, putting a dark bottle down in front of Xero.

"Working," Xero answered as she keyed in her payment and a generous tip. "Who's the newbies?"

"Just that, newbies. Both after Wordee. The one on the right is a potential employer, the one on the left is a suitor." After a moment's reflection she continued, "I guess it's your fault."

"How d'ya figure?" Xero asked, taking a sip of the smooth beer. Her eyes wandered over to the dart game as LN threw another bullseye to a chorus of cheers and groans. Returning her attention to Ska, she eyed the woman speculatively.

"You nailed Bat, one of the few straight women who hang out here. That makes it hard on the rest of 'em. Not that I'm going to cry them any rivers anytime soon."

"I heard that," Lani remarked from a table behind Xero's. "Ska's picking on the straight chicks again," she continued, only louder this time.

"Oh, look who's talking," the waitress shot back sarcastically. Ska was convinced Lani was gay. Lani thought it none of her business, and the two bickered about it endlessly.

All eyes turned to a table in the center of the room. Blue, the Arbitrator had been trying to enjoy a peaceful dinner with Jenbob and Robin, suddenly found herself the center of attention. "So make her buy the straight chicks a drink," she decided. Sentence passed, everyone returned to their individual business.

"There go my tips for tonight," Ska muttered wandering off.

Xero enjoyed her beer. Left alone to observe the interactions around her, she felt herself finally unwind. The big winners at darts, LN and Trillbaby, bought the next round for the house. Halfway through her second beer, the receiver in her ear clicked on.

"I've got something for you, can you talk?" Bat's disembodied voice asked softly in her ear.

"Yeah, what d'ya have," Xero asked after another sip.

"I'm off the nets, running a closed loop system checking out your files. You've got a tapeworm all right, but it isn't a tracker."

"What d'ya mean?"

"I mean she sent over a shit load of files, but nothing to track you. It's all stuff so you can get in touch with her. She may be a psycho."

"How do you know it's a she?" Xero wondered.

"That's what I'm telling you. She sent over personnel files, all kinds of shit. Her name is Rielle MacGab, I've got a picture, she's cute... I mean if you're interested in women, that sort of thing."

"I get your point, Bat, go on," Xero pressed.

"According to this, she's a syscop for the Archives Corp. But she's on a L.O.A. She had a medical leave a couple of months ago, now she's just taking vacation." Xero could picture Bat as she went through the files. Shoes off, curled up on the couch, fidigitizing with a pen in one hand. Her speech was rapid which told Xero she was scanning files as she spoke, struggling to keep up with her mechanical eye.

"So why do you think she's a psycho?" Xero asked.

"All this other stuff she sent you. Xero, buddy, she must have been waiting for you to log into that data stream. She was watching you the whole time. She's downloaded a book, *The Adventure of a Lifetime, a Memoir by Melinda Pappas*. Provided links to a television database for an old '90's show, a bunch of episodes of that show, her own records and the message that you tried to cut off. Be careful, Xero, she's planning to meet you at the 'Horn."

"You unlocked all this with the keyword Amphipolis?" Xero asked, scanning the inhabitants of the club once again.

"Yeah, just like her greeting said. I'm running on top of a buffer system, so I'm not worried about getting zapped. But it was just a simple keyword. No traps or homing beacons. If this picture is an accurate one, you're looking for a twenty-six year-old red head with green eyes and," she paused to read further, "according to her psyche files, a sunny disposition." Xero didn't answer right away and Bat laughed. "Yeah, I know. Just your type. Still, why not have a go? The 'Horn regulars are too intimidated to actually sleep with you. Did I mention you being annoyingly tense all week?"

"If that's all the news you've got," Xero cut her off. "Why don't you reassemble the system and get it back onto the nets. Put all this new stuff on an isolated drive and I'll look at it later."

"Okay, will do," Bat assured the hacker. "Logging off now."

The 'Horn was beginning to fill up as more women came in after their mid-day shifts. Few of the women who frequented the place had regular jobs, but there were a number of hackers who kept regular hours too. Especially the women who worked for hacking companies. They had shifts and benefits the same as legitimate workers. Xero considered ordering dinner when a tense hush settled over the club. A couple of men, or 'bobs' as they were known at the 'Horn, had stepped through the security markers and were making their way to the bar. Both were tall, about Xero's height and good looking. Their sun bleached hair and bronzed skin screamed 'surfer'.

Xero noticed Delirium step away from Addict, who was pouring drinks for the bobs. Retrieving the mobie unit from her pocket, she keyed in the secured frequency and turned on her communications device.

"...obs at the 'Horn, Shadow. See what you can do." Delirium said quietly.

"They been here before?" Xero asked.

"Xero, that you?" Delirium asked as she looked over. Seeing the dark haired woman's affirming nod, she continued. "No, they're newbies, not trolls. They just told Addict that they're in construction and retrofit, they're here on vacation. Too tan to be hackers."

"I'm in their net accounts now," Shadow offered.

"Then take it easy on them, Shad," Xero asked. "When you screw with their files, don't mess 'em up too bad."

"Bat send you out to find her dates?" Shadow asked with a wry laugh.

"Yeah, so give 'em her locator file. Then they'll know who to contact to clean up the mess."

"Okay, will do," Shadow agreed. "They should be out of there as soon as they try to pay."

As if on cue, one of the men looked alarmed as he swiped his account card through the reader a second time. The other man tried his card, but with the same lack of success. Both men left abruptly. When they'd logged on to their accounts they had found garbled text instead of account information. Once they were out the door and down the block, their drinks were raffled off, the two winners raising their glasses in silent toast to their now absent benefactors.

Bat carefully adjusted her baseball cap before connecting the final system wire to the net brainbox. If a trap, or any other aggressive program had slipped past her careful examination, this was often enough to trigger it. She held her breath for a couple seconds, and when nothing happened she readjusted her hat and relaxed. No matter how many years went by, every system connection took her back to the day five years ago when she'd earned the name Bat and lost an eye in the process. She should have seen the trap but didn't. As a result, her client's brain box blew up in her face, damaging the lens of her left eye beyond repair. Convinced she'd be blind, her friends started calling her 'Bat.' Her vision was restored with the aid of a mechanical replacement, but the name stuck anyway.

System initialized, she keyed in Xero's general use account. If someone was after her boss, logging into the system as herself would serve little purpose. She started with routine housekeeping. Xero's preferences were pretty straightforward, and Bat knew the subroutines as if they were her own. She logged in the day's messages and took note of the net account balances. Everything was in order there as well.

Satisfied that the system was operating as it should, she launched the program that would fling her onto the nets. Cruising Xero's regular haunts, she noticed a few familiar faces identified by their screen icons, as well as several new ones. She'd cloaked Xero's own icon, making her invisible to the other passersby unless they were using a high-end detection program. Even then, the detector would only be able to tell that another entity was logged on, not that it was Xero. Unfortunately, such programs caused more trouble than they were worth while hacking, so they were usually only used for sightseeing or other legitimate net business.

Things were slow, but Bat noted that it was still early. She was about to make her way to the node for the 'Horn when she was stopped by a greeting.

We meet again, Xero, the message said.

"Holy shit," Bat gasped, her good eye widening in surprise as she sat staring at the screen.

Or should I say, Xena? the message continued.

"It's her psycho," Bat whispered as she touched the control of her mobie unit. "Xero, you there?" she asked, worried. There was no response. Either Xero was on another channel, or the mobile communications system had been jammed. Bat glanced back at the screen. The message was waiting for a response. "What would Xero say?" she wondered. She'd been spotted and tagged, it was no good to try to pretend otherwise. Finally she keyed in her response. *Who the fuck is Xena?*

Could it be that you don't know yet? This gets better all the time, the message flashed, red letters on black. *I'm going to enjoy killing you, Xena, I only hope it's as good for you as it will be for me.*

Bat hit the code sequence to dump her off the nets to the safety of her own computer. Nothing happened. She tried a different command, one that would simply cut all power to the system. Again, nothing. Reaching over, she hit the emergency crash switch on the main drive. It would corrupt active data but was an escape of last resort. When that failed she keyed her response.

Who are you? Bat asked, trying to fight her growing fear, and losing.

I'm sorry, it's been such a long time. Xena, my dear, my name is Ares.

Xero decided it was time to leave. There wouldn't be anything happening here for her tonight. She pushed away from her table, and began to stand as a third Buckner was put down in front of her. The hacker looked up into the loveliest green eyes she'd ever seen. "Mind if I buy you a drink?" a soft voice asked.

Keeping eye contact, the hacker stood and smiled. Xero towered over the shorter woman, who she figured could only be the syscop Bat had warned her about. Strawberry blond, petite, beautiful. Her one-eyed associate did have a gift for understatement. Xero wrapped her long fingers around the neck of the beer bottle. "You don't mind if I take it with me?" she asked. Beautiful as this woman was, she was still a syscop.

A smaller hand wrapped around her own, holding the bottle onto the table. "As a matter of fact, I do," the young woman said evenly. "When I buy a beautiful woman a drink, I expect her to finish it in my company."

Xero flashed her a grin, displaying a mouthful of perfect white teeth. There might be something here worth the risk after all, she decided. "That's rather butch of you," she commented sitting down again. The other woman took the seat opposite her and let go of her hand but didn't say anything. "Use that line a lot do you?" Xero asked, after taking a sip of the beer.

"On occasion," the other woman replied with false bravado. Xero laughed and the other woman frowned. "I say something funny?"

"You don't lie very well," the hacker replied. "No, I'd bet a bottle of spring water that I'm the first woman you've hit on in a bar. Isn't that so, Rielle?"

Her companion looked at the table as her cheeks flushed crimson before making eye contact again. "I'm glad you took the time to look at my files at least," she finally said, changing the subject. "Xero, I need to talk to you."

"Too bad, I don't talk to syscops," the older woman replied flatly.

"Can I buy you dinner? Give me that much time at least?" Rielle asked.

"Fine," Xero replied with an artful shrug. She nodded to the waitress who came over to take her order. "Kitchen have fresh produce?" she asked.

Ska blinked. Naturally grown fruits and vegetables were very expensive delicacies. "Yeah, some," she replied. "We've got fresh soy stuff too."

"I'll have a salad with the works," Xero requested. "Hold the tofu."

"For two," Rielle added, handing over her account card.

When the waitress was gone, she turned to her companion once again. "Xero, I'm going to tell you a story. You're going to think its fantastic, but I want you to hear me out anyway."

"Until I'm done eating, I'm all yours," she replied.

Feeling warm, Xena? The message on the screen taunted.

Bat tried again in vain to break eye contact with the data code that scrolled past her eyes at blinding speed. If she'd had two natural eyes, all she would have seen was a mesmerizing blur. Unfortunately, with her mechanical eye she could make out some of what she was reading. The repetitive, hypnotic code was sending signals to her body. Her brain, unable to filter out the harmful instructions, could only wait and experience the body's self destruction. Like subliminal advertising on steroids, Bat was helpless against the onslaught of information. Sweating and dizzy, she guessed her fever must be well over one hundred three degrees by now.

I'm not Xena, she finally managed to send.

Sure you are, the message came back. *You just don't remember yet. I really didn't know the battle for the third age would be this easy. Even Melinda Pappas was more of a challenge than you. So, wanna race?*

Bat's heart started beating faster, her heated blood pulsing through her system. In rapid succession blisters formed on her lungs, burst and slowly began to fill the organs with fluid. Bat began to drown as she tried desperately not to panic. If she was going to die, as now seemed likely, she wanted someone to know why and how. Eyes still riveted on the scrolling text, in the periphery of her vision she could see the isolated drive sitting on top of the brainbox. Unable to move her head, she managed to yank a wire from an unused diagnostic unit and then plug the drive in as she

keyed in a record sequence. Just then her lungs were released. As she violently coughed up hot fluid, scorching the delicate membranes of her windpipe, her pulse sped up. Whatever was killing her intended to do it slowly.

You don't know how long I've waited for this, Xena. I've had thousands of years to plot your destruction. I never doubted that as long as I got to you before that irritating blond did, I'd have you. I hope you're able to fully appreciate what you could have had all those millennia ago, when a simple 'yes' from you would have given you immortality.

Feeling something wet on her leg, the hacker noted that her hands had broken out in blisters that were popping soon after forming. Clear plasma ran down her fingers onto the input pad and finally and dripping on her thigh. Her eminent death looking messy, Bat took the battered baseball cap off her head and tossed it aside. A remembrance of her mother who had died in the Plague, she wasn't about to let her own demise ruin Mickey Mouse.

Her lungs filled with fluid and she waited for the end. Something slimy hit her monitor and she absently noticed it was her natural eye, popped from its socket from intercranial pressure. Were it not for her implant, she'd be blissfully blind.

Well, Xena, it's been fun. Give my regards to Callisto, Valaska and Hades when you see them.

She could smell charring flesh now and would have screamed had she been able to get the air, to do so. Instead she winced as she felt her aorta finally explode in her chest cavity. After that everything slowed down until life itself mercifully ended.

"Let me get this straight," Xero said dubiously. "You're saying this bar was originally funded by the Pappas Foundation, that saddle hanging over there bought at the big auction the Smithsonian had when their funding was cut?" Rielle nodded and let the other woman continue. "And this Melinda Pappas fought the battle of the second age." Rielle nodded again. "And I'm related to her, how?" Xero asked.

"In a way you're her ancestor," Rielle explained. "Melinda Pappas was related to Xena and Janice Covington was related to Gabrielle. You and I are the reincarnated souls of Xena and Gabrielle."

"That's right," Xero amended, not believing a word of it. "Which one am I again?"

"You're Xena," Rielle said losing her patience.

"Of course, the 'X's, I should have known. Okay, I'm Xena and I'm going to fight the Battle of the Third Age. Against who?"

"Against Ares," the syscop continued clearly annoyed. "And believe me, if you don't start taking this a bit more seriously, you're going to lose."

"Well I wouldn't want that," Xero shot back with a smirk.

"Didn't you read any of the material I sent over?" Rielle asked. "I was hoping it'd jog your memory."

"You've said that Xena and Gabrielle were lovers," Xero offered. "Don't you think *that* would jog my memory?"

An unreadable look crossed the younger woman's face. "I'm willing to try anything," she said quietly.

"Well, don't make it sound like such a chore," Xero shot back miffed.

"It's not that, Xero, it's just that obviously I can remember things at this point that you can't." She shook her head sadly. "It'd be a lot different for me than for you, I suspect."

Xero was tempted to tell the young woman to forget the whole thing and just leave. Still, there was something about her company she found intriguing and wasn't ready to part ways just yet. If nothing else, she could take the woman home and let the terrified newbie off the hook then. "Fine then," Xero said as she stood. "Let's go."

All eyes in the Saddlehorn Pub & Grill watched the newbie leave with Xero. It wasn't unusual to see the hacker leave with attractive women. But it was puzzling to see the evening's victor not appear pleased at the conquest.

“So when did you first realize that you were the reincarnated essence of an Ancient Amphipolitian Bard?” Xero asked as they stepped off the lift at her floor.

“Poteidaia, Gabrielle was from Poteidaia,” Rielle corrected her.

“Whatever.”

“I started having vivid dreams a few months ago. Unusual at first, but they wouldn’t go away. Then I started to do some research. The more I learned, the more things fit into place,” the syscop explained as they walked down the hall to the older woman’s apartment.

“I still don’t see how it’s possible to be reincarnated from a television show,” Xero insisted.

“Not from a show, you big dumb hacker,” she snapped. “The show was based on a collection of scrolls Janice Covington discovered in 1942, then later in 1961. The ‘42 Scrolls were hidden away until the ‘90’s when they were used for the show.”

Xero nodded as she ran her thumb over the door’s ID patch. It unlocked and upon opening it her senses were immediately assaulted by the acrid smell of burnt hair and flesh. “What the fuck!” she gasped and ran inside.

Bat, or rather her charred remains, sat rigidly on the couch. Small tendrils of smoke still drifted off of the body. A flaming sword could clearly be seen rotating on the screen in front of her with the words *Goodbye Xena* below them. A green light was blinking on the portable drive indicating that it had just been backed up.

“That’s Ares’ symbol,” Rielle said, pointing to the screen.

“What happened to her?” Xero whispered, realizing her roommate was beyond dead. “She’s grounded,” the hacker said noting the ground wire trailing from band wrapped around the dead woman’s wrist. “How could she have been zapped?” For a moment Xero couldn’t help but stare at the grotesque corpse. When her gaze landed on Bat’s mechanical eye, still functioning from it’s back up battery, she shut her eyes and turned away.

“That is what I’m trying to explain,” Rielle said softly. “Ares must have thought she was you, or he’s just practicing. Xero, this is a god we’re talking about. He’s powerful.”

Xero turned to her companion, her blue eyes flashing in sorrow and anger. “So now you’re a Fundie?” she demanded. “Did you orchestrate this?” she growled as she advancing on the smaller woman. Wisely, Rielle backed up. “Rig the equipment? A syscop who works for Archive Corporation, maybe, is that it?” Backed against the wall, Rielle looked up into the face of her aggressor. She was much shorter than the hacker, her head only reaching just past the taller woman’s shoulder. Craning her neck back, she tried to remain calm as cold blue eyes bore into her. “I’ll ask one more time, ‘cop. Are you or are you not a bounty hunter?”

“Xero, you know I’m not,” she said carefully. “You can see for yourself she’s still smoking. She’s only been dead a matter of minutes. I was with you. Do you honestly think I could construct a remote program that your friend couldn’t disable?”

“She wasn’t my friend,” Xero muttered turning away.

Rielle looked again from the charred body to the woman who once was Xena. “What was she then?” she asked quietly.

“A good acquaintance.” Xero shrugged.

Walking over to the taller woman, she put a comforting hand on her arm. “Even so, it isn’t safe for you to stay here. Even if you don’t believe what I’ve told you about Ares, surely a corpse in your apartment isn’t something a hacker would care to explain, now is it?” Rielle continued seriously. “Why don’t you come to my place. You can crash there tonight. Maybe in the morning you’ll listen to some’ve what I have to say.”

Xero nodded absently. The syscop was right. Bat’s body would have to be tended to, and there were too many unanswered questions for her to remain. She’d probably be implicated in the murder, although the authorities wouldn’t worry too much about a dead hacker. She would find whoever it was who did this, syscop or no syscop. Shaking her head, Xero grabbed a small bag and began throwing in her things.

She picked up her portable system, and disconnected the isolated drive that had been blinking. Grabbing a second pair of jeans, a shirt and some loose credit slips, she added her wallet

and some mini discs, and was ready to go. "I should take Argo," she said as an afterthought.

"Argo?" Rielle asked, eyes wide.

"Yeah, Bat's iguana."

The syscop looked at the dead woman with growing unease. Could she have been mistaken and contacted the wrong one? "This woman has a pet named Argo? Where did she get the name?"

"I don't know," Xero replied with a shrug heading for the bedroom that led off from the main living room. "I think she said she heard me mumble it in my sleep." She returned several minutes later, a large bright green reptile perched on her shoulder. Rielle guessed the animal's body to be about forty centimeters long not counting the tail. "I don't know why, but Bat had a soft spot for lost causes," Xero explained, putting a container of food into her pocket.

"Is that why she lived with you?" Rielle asked.

Xero glared at her. "She lived with me because she worked for me. She put in long hours keeping my rig in shape. Besides, here she had some measure of protection against corporate thugs." Xero looked once again at the dead woman's body. "Apparently it wasn't enough." Making her way towards the door, she paused at the couch. Picking up Bat's antique baseball hat, she put it on and smiled sadly. "I'm going to find the thugs that did this," she whispered. "And when I do, they won't end up looking half as good as you." Cold blue eyes taking a final sweep around the small apartment, Xero realized that there was nothing else she needed, nothing else she could take with her. "Let's go," she muttered tightly to her companion.

"Here we are." Rielle pushed open the heavy front door to her apartment. Xero, already impressed by the prime location of the building, stood speechless at the spaciousness of the dwelling.

"How many people live here?" she asked, putting her heavy bag down on the overstuffed couch.

"I live alone," Rielle answered.

"I didn't know syscops did so well," Xero quipped, trying to mask her amazement. No one lived alone save the extremely wealthy. The fact that she only lived with one person spoke volumes about how well she did as a hacker.

"Yeah, well it belonged to my parents," Rielle explained, answering Xero's unasked question. "They both died a few years ago. The flat was already paid for."

Xero nodded and looked around. The place even had windows. Unable to resist, she strolled over and looked outside. At night the city lights sparkled brightly, making the South California skyline pulsate with glowing beauty. "Would you like something to drink?" Rielle called from the kitchen.

"Sure," Xero called back. "Whatever you've got." After moments spent in rapt fascination at the window, she was joined by the syscop.

"You mentioned spring water earlier, so I thought this would be okay." Rielle handed her a glass of iced water.

Xero took a sip. "You seem to have everything here."

Rielle looked uncomfortable "I guess. But I stand to lose it all, everyone stands to lose everything if you don't get your memory back and battle Ares."

"Are we on that again?" Xero asked, exasperated. "Look, kid. If this is a clever line you're using to get me in the sack, trust me, you're trying way too hard."

"Is that what you think this is about? Fucking you?" Rielle stormed away from the window. "Xena must have looked long and hard to find the densest, dumbest... most clueless body she could. Your friend is sitting burned to a crisp on your couch and you think I'm making a pass at you?"

"I'd be careful if I were you," Xero growled. "I'm in no mood to be taunted by some spoiled syscop who thinks she's bringing in the catch of the day. You don't play this game very well do you, Rielle? You pick me up in a dyke bar, give me this bullshit about past lives, throw in New Age Fundie crap with the god Ares and tell me I'm going to suddenly remember being a reformed warlord from Amphipolis!" As she turned she winced. Argo, losing his balance from her shoulder,

grabbed with a foreclaw, sharp nails digging into her exposed skin above the collar of the leather jacket.

“Here,” Rielle offered moving to take the lizard from the taller woman’s shoulder. “Why don’t we put Argo down.” Gently as she could, she put the big reptile down on the floor. The animal was heavier than he looked.

“Thanks,” Xero muttered.

Rielle softened. “I’m sorry. Why don’t you take some time. I’m sure there’s someone you should notify about your fri... associate’s death. I wish you’d trust me, but I realize that you think you can’t. Still, I have to tell you that I’ve no intention of arresting you or turning you in. You’re welcome to stay, the couch is yours. Make yourself at home. We can talk more about Xena and the other stuff in the morning.” She turned away and walked toward the bedroom. “If you were serious about what you said earlier,” she added, turning back around, “About needing to jog your memory, I’ll be in here.”

Xero watched her go. The other woman had made it clear that she was up for sex but didn’t want it. No matter, Xero decided, she wasn’t in the mood anyway. She wandered into the kitchen, opening up cupboards until she found a small bowl. She poured some of the spring water from her glass into the bowl and put it on the floor near the lizard. Pulling out her mobie unit, she keyed in the satellite codes for maximum encryption and called the ‘Horn.

Wandering back to the window, she waited for the connection to link up. “IQ? This is Xero, put me through to Shadow.” After a moment’s pause she was connected. “Yeah, Shadow, it’s Xero. Look, I’ve got bad news. Bat is dead. She was fried about an hour ago. I found her when I went home... No, I’m not there now. I’m... elsewhere. If she’s got any family or anything, you need to let them know. I’m uploading the codes to my place. Security would just dump the body, she deserves better than that.... Thanks, Shadow, I appreciate it. Keep my place secure if you can. I’m going to track down whoever did this, I might need to go back and get some things... Okay, I will. Thanks again.” Feeling numb, she broke the connection and put the mobie away. She looked around the stylishly decorated apartment, then headed for the couch. She decided to stay. If the syscop was set on taking her in, Xero decided it was one way to see how good the young woman really was. She took off her boots, casually tossing them under a low table near the couch. Removing her jacket, she pulled out the small container of food pellets and put a few down on the floor for the iguana. She then extracted her small hand held flame thrower from a concealed pocket and put it on the table. Finally she took off her hat. She gazed at the faded picture of a cartoon mouse for long minutes, reverently tracing its outline with her finger. Shaking off the pensive reflection, she put the hat on the table as well. She laid down, stretching her long legs, the concealed flame thrower in her right hand. With that, and easy access to two concealed knives, Xero decided she was as safe as she could be under the circumstances. When she closed her eyes, sleep was almost instantly.

Xero looked around disoriented. She was standing in a corporate board room dressed in her jeans and t-shirt uncharacteristically barefoot.

“So glad you could make it,” said a firm voice in greeting.

Looking up, Xero was startled to see two women sitting behind a polished black table. Both were dressed in old-fashioned tuxedos. One of them looked a lot like her and the other looked like Rielle, the syscop.

“I must be dreaming,” Xero said, trying to make sense of her surroundings.

“The hacker catches on fast,” the strawberry-blond continued. “We decided on formal wear for our first meeting, I hope that’s okay with you. I’m Janice Covington, and the ravishing creature next to me is Melinda Pappas.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Xero.” Melinda said surprising the hacker with her Southern accent.

“I never dream,” Xero stated bluntly, wondering why she wasn’t simply waking up.

“Believe me, that’s been a major problem for us,” Janice replied. “Fact is, this isn’t going to be fun. The stuff Rielle is telling you is true. If you can stop thinking with your libido and refrain from bullying her, you might learn something. Why don’t you try listening for a change.”

“I don’t have to take this crap from you,” Xero growled, deciding she liked the syscop’s look alike even less

than the syscop.

“Actually, Xero you do.” Janice grinned.

“What she means,” Mel interjected, “is that you have to sleep. Now that we’ve reached you, we’re going to keep at it.”

“Look kid,” Janice continued, “Ares is on the move. He offed that friend of yours. With our help you’re going to see to it that his sorry ass is blown to kingdom-come.”

“Janice!” Mel implored referring to her companion’s harsh language.

“Relax, Mel!” Janice soothed. “I’m just trying to get through to the Warrior Princess over here. Xena, we need you to remember. We’re going to do whatever it takes to see that you do remember. We didn’t risk life and limb to have you forfeit the Battle of the Third Age.”

“Battle of the Third Age?” Xero mumbled.

“Gods she’s slow,” Janice groaned in frustration.

“Janice, please! She’s been through a lot. It was hard getting through to Gabrielle too if you remember. Give her some time to get her bearings, get to know Rielle. At least let her say goodbye to her friend.”

“I don’t have any friends,” Xero replied automatically.

“I never thought I’d meet someone who made Xena look well adjusted,” Janice quipped. After getting an icy glare from Mel, she continued, “Alright, you’ve been through a lot. We won’t get started right now. Rest up some, but start thinking. Search your feelings. You are more than you imagine. Get in touch with what’s beyond you. We can’t help you if you don’t help us.”

“Whaaa…” Xero looked around the room. The lights had dimmed automatically with her inactivity. Something felt odd, but she couldn’t quite describe it. She checked her watch. Not needing to check her watch she knew she’d been asleep for three hours. Mildly surprised that the syscop had not in fact tried to arrest her, she sat up and stretched. Absently, she considered the young woman may have been telling the truth after all, far fetched as it sounded. Putting her weapons on the coffee table with the baseball hat, she silently walked over to the bedroom door.

Rielle was sleeping on her side, facing the door on the far side of the bed. *“Staying as far away as possible from me, no doubt,”* Xero considered. When she crossed the room and picked up the bed cover the other woman’s eyes flew open with a start.

“What is it?” Rielle asked frightened.

“Relax, Rielle. I’m not after your virtue. I think the couch is uncomfortable, it made me have a weird dream. I’m sleeping here.” The hacker slid under the covers.

“Weird dream you say?” A small smile tugged at Rielle’s lips.

“Yeah,” Xero muttered. “These two women in tuxedos. It’s nothing. Lemme sleep.”

Rielle’s smile broadened as she watched her companion slip into slumber. Realizing that things might just work out after all, the smile remained as she too drifted off to sleep.

There’s only one way to rock

— Sammy Hagar

Chapter 1: Reinitializing the Program

Xero awoke, groggy and confused in an unfamiliar bedroom. This in and of itself was not unusual. Alone in the large bed, dressed in only her tank top and underwear, she surveyed her surroundings. The soft, expensive sheets were a chaotic mess. In the dim light, the sparsely furnished bedroom had an airy warmth to it. The outline of a closet panel was visible on one side of the room; simple shelves dominated the wall on the other. A number of computer minidrives were stacked neatly on the polished metal surface. Xero noticed several rows of bound paper books as well. She looked around for a monitor and was surprised the room didn’t have one. The closest thing was the mirror above the dresser opposite the foot of the bed. Xero studied her reflection as the memories of the previous night resurfaced. Running her fingers through her hair she got up and decided to look for her host, the syscop.

As she opened the bedroom door, her nose was assaulted by the delicious scent of fresh food. Padding silently into the kitchen, she watched as Rielle divided the contents of a steaming bowl onto two plates. The syscop turned around, and was visibly startled by Xero's presence, almost dropping one of the plates. Xero grabbed the unbalanced plate with one hand, and supported Rielle's elbow with the other.

"Thanks," the syscop said shyly. "I didn't know you were up."

"So you were going to eat this all yourself?" The hacker looked pointedly at both plates.

Rielle swallowed nervously. Her eyes traveled up from the floor, taking in her guest's long legs and muscular body. "Well, um, I was going to wake you when I got the food on the table."

"Were you now?" the tall woman challenged gently, noting with satisfaction the color heightening the syscop's cheeks. "You weren't going to serve me in bed? You offered to last night."

"Yes, yes I did," Rielle said evenly, looking directly into Xero's piercing blue eyes. "For a very specific reason, and you declined my offer. Now if you can stop thinking about sex for ten minutes maybe we can come up with some other idea for restoring your memory."

"I don't know. Ten minutes is an awfully long time." Xero grinned as the shorter woman pushed past her and headed to a small dining table.

Xero let her eyes wander around the room as she took her seat. The early morning sun filtered through the thick marine layer illuminating the living space with an eerie grayness. From this vantage point high up in the Malibu Hills, the Pacific Ocean could be seen in the distance, reflecting the morning's light. Xero noted the thin outline of a security panel and two discrete wires that disappeared into the wall next to the window. The hacker's gaze casually surveyed the living room, taking note that her things on the coffee table were just as she'd left them. Argo was perched on the back of the couch and regarded her with indifference. Up near the ceiling, Xero noticed two small motion detectors and a signal array of some sort.

"You're casing my home," Rielle said, cutting off the hacker's thoughts. "Knock it off."

Xero shrugged unapologetically. "Professional habit."

"You're into burglary as well as online larceny?" the syscop inquired putting the plate down in front of her guest.

"Sometimes you have to go to the mainframe to hack," she explained, digging into her food. "It isn't all done from the comfort of our living rooms."

When Rielle took her seat, a panel slid aside in the wall across from the table, revealing a large monitor. Rielle reached for a control to turn it off but Xero stopped her with a wave of her hand. "It's alright," the hacker said, eyes fixed on the screen. "I like to watch the news while I eat breakfast too."

Rielle nodded and returned her attention to her plate. She glanced occasionally at her companion and wondered just how she was going to deal with the pugnacious hacker. It was well into the lead story that her attention finally shifted to the news broadcast.

"...to the surprise of many, Senator Jasper Helms, the Republican of North California has declared his candidacy for President in the 2046 election. President Taborn was unavailable for comment.

"The President has been in closed meetings since the mysterious death last night of two of her closest advisors. Chief of Staff Elizabeth Book and Mark Sands of the Ronin Corporation were both found dead in their homes, the apparent victims of online murder. Each victim was running a system using the latest in state of the art safeguards. Many, including the President are concerned. Word from the White House is that every effort is being expended on and offline to track down the responsible parties and bring them to justice..."

"I can't believe Helms is running," Rielle remarked. "Last I'd heard, the oaf was out of money. He lost a lot of steam endorsing the Throwback Bill last term."

Xero nodded. "He was out of money all right. I saw his accounts last quarter. He was up to his ears in debt with Values America..." Xero's voice trailed off at the look of shock that crossed her companion's face.

"You hacked your way into congressional files? Who on earth hired you for that?" An

arched eyebrow in her direction was all the answer Rielle got. “Of course. Client-hacker confidentiality,” she muttered.

Xero leaned back and smiled, sipping her coffee. It was real, not the soy coffee product she usually drank. Rielle impressed her at every turn. For a syscop, she was finding the young woman across from her rather disarming, as well as attractive. “It was no big job, really,” the hacker said, taking another sip from her mug. “My client was looking to withdraw support for Helms on two fronts. They didn’t appreciate his attempt to repeal the Personal Freedom legislation of ‘15 and they didn’t support his ban on cerebral enhancement research. They simply wanted to know if he could finance a smear campaign before they walked away. He couldn’t, not by a long shot.”

Suddenly Xero’s attention was riveted on the monitor screen. The news story had shifted to the deaths of the President’s advisors. The center of the screen was dominated by the live report from the scene of one of the murders. The announcer was joined on camera by the unfortunate housekeeper who had discovered the body.

“It was just awful,” the tearful woman moaned. “I found him here, in his study. Obviously he’d been zapped, his body was still smoking.”

“What is it?” Rielle asked starring at Xero.

The hacker pointed to the screen. Rielle followed the line of her finger to a blurry monitor in the background of the live action shot. A simple logo was illuminated on the screen, the same one she’d seen hours earlier in Xero’s apartment. “Shit,” she whispered. “Ares.”

“At this point I’m inclined to believe you,” Xero muttered, staring at the screen.

“You are?” Rielle gasped, shocked.

“Not that shit about gods and all, but maybe it’s a code name for a corporate muscle or something. Maybe a virus. Whatever it is, I intend to find out...”

“Hold it right there,” Rielle demanded, keeping Xero’s eyes captive with her own. “I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to go on the nets. Especially not as yourself. Remember, Ares thinks you’re dead. You show up anywhere as Xero and he’s going to know he fried the wrong person. Your friend’s death may have given you an advantage. Is that something you’re going to throw away?”

Xero didn’t say anything as she studied her companion. What the syscop said had merit, even if it wasn’t what she wanted to hear. At the very least, it wouldn’t hurt to hear the younger woman out. “Why do I sense you’ve another proposition for me?” she said, disinterested. “I’ll have you know I’m already disappointed your last proposition didn’t pan out.”

Rielle smiled, flattered in spite of herself. The part of her that held Gabrielle’s memories ached at the sight of her soul mate, and the part of her that was Rielle was attracted to the beautiful woman anyway. “You’ve made it clear you want to look into what happened to your friend--sorry, associate. Why don’t you give me an hour or two to check on my own sources to see if I can dig anything up? If I do, you can take the information and go on from there.”

“Why would you do that?” Xero asked suspiciously.

“You just don’t get it do you,” Rielle answered sadly. “Like it or not, you’re my business now. I have to keep you alive long enough for you to remember what’s at stake here. You may think I’m some deranged wacko, fine. But I intend to do whatever it takes,” she paused as her companions eyebrow arched, “yes, including *that*. Look, why don’t you take a shower, maybe a cold one? I’ll scan the nets and see what I can find.”

Rielle waited, watching as Xero considered her options. The hacker’s face gave nothing away as she calmly regarded the syscop sitting across from her. “Fine,” she agreed. “I’ll get cleaned up and you see what’s out there.” In one fluid movement she rose from the table and walked toward the bathroom.

“Two millennia later and she *still* won’t tell me what she’s thinking,” Rielle grumbled after the hacker had departed.

Xero leaned into the cool water of the shower. The syscop was right. The cold water was just what she needed to refocus her thoughts and get her bearings. She shivered as she leaned her

head back, letting the water soak into her long black hair. With a grimace she reached for the old fashioned bar soap. What was she going to do about the syscop? Briefly she considered that her reaction to the strawberry blond was just hormonal. It had been a while, after all. Still, she knew in her gut there was more to it than that. She didn't know just how much more, and wasn't sure she wanted to find out. Absently she lathered the clear glycerine soap between her hands, enjoying the fresh herbal fragrance and silky lather. The young syscop was indeed a throwback. Bar soap, cotton towels, bound books--the apartment was filled with things that spoke of the past. A time when things were in some ways simpler than they were now.

Xero washed her hair, then rinsed her body once again. Briefly she tasted the water streaming down her face. She was surprised at its purity. Either Rielle MacGab had her own private water reserves, or she owned a state of the art filtration system. The pieces just didn't fit. Syscops made money, but not the kind of credit that would enable this lifestyle. It was possible her parents were of means and left her the apartment. They probably died in the plague like everyone else's parents. But the upkeep and taxes on an apartment this size were still expensive.

There was something else that didn't fit. Rielle seemed far too open and honest to be trusted. First she was trying to bluff the hacker into believing she picked up women on a regular basis, and the next morning she seemed scared to death to be eating breakfast with an infamous criminal. If Rielle was playing a game, Xero decided, she was either not playing it very well or she was playing it better than anyone else.

After drying her body and towel drying her hair, Xero dressed and headed back into the living room. Rielle was where she'd left her, sitting at the table, breakfast dishes pushed to the side, eyes intent on the large monitor. She had an input pad in front of her, and the hacker noted with approval that the syscop's eyes never left the screen as she worked the controls. It seemed more believable to her now that this was indeed the woman who had tapped her online the night before.

Hard to believe it was only last night. With a sigh Xero sat down on the overstuffed couch and proceeded to don her socks and boots. She still had deadlines to meet, jobs to complete. Only now she'd have to do the tedious prep work herself. "*Still,*" she considered, "*if there's a wake tonight at the Horn for Bat, maybe I can pass off some of the grunt work then.*" Just then Rielle spoke up, and Xero wondered if the younger woman had just read her thoughts.

"I hope you didn't have big plans for today," the syscop said. "Because I've got some pretty bad news."

"What is it?" Xero asked, walking back to the dining room table.

"Well, according to this," Rielle explained, "you're dead."

Xero looked at the file her companion was indicating. It was an Archive Corporation roster of known and wanted hackers. She recognized all of the names, knew most of them by face, but oddly enough, she wasn't among those listed.

Rielle keyed a sequence into her input panel and a new list appeared, one of recently captured or deceased hackers. Xero found her screen name listed at number three. "While your friend The Bat," Rielle checked the first file again, "make that Renée Palmer, is still wanted by Archive and any number of other corporate entities, you're not wanted by anyone. They all think you're dead." Rielle looked over her shoulder seriously at the woman standing behind her. "I'm impressed that none of them know your real name."

Xero flashed Rielle a grin. She didn't have the heart to tell her that 'Xero' had in fact been her name since she was two. Uncoordinated at dodgeball, a kid who couldn't spell had named her thus on the orphanage playground. The name stuck, and by the time she was five, Xero had forgotten what her given name actually was. "Funny, I feel pretty good for a dead thing," Xero quipped, still smiling. "I suppose my net accounts have been frozen?"

"Oh yeah," Rielle affirmed. "If you can hack your way into your own systems, fine. Still I think you're better off letting this play out. Ares is going to find out sooner or later you're not dead. Chances are some other hacker will tip him off. As you can see by the list, he visited two other hackers last night after your friend."

"How can you be so sure it's him, or it, or whoever?" Xero asked.

“Well,” Rielle said with a shrug, “it isn’t any secret that TufGuy and 2Shy hacked for the government. I’m guessing Ares found what he was looking for from them then went after the Ronin brass Mark Sands and then President Taborn’s Chief of Staff. Did TufGuy or 2Shy have any connection to Bat?” she asked as she keyed the sequence to save the files.

“I think she knew TufGuy from when she worked at Ronin. As for 2Shy, I don’t know,” the hacker admitted. Already Xero’s mind was thinking ahead. If whatever it was that killed her partner had downloaded her files, a lot of people could be at risk. She quickly inventoried the disks she’d brought with her. The most sensitive data she’d accumulated in her criminal career was safe for the moment. While her files were encoded, she still had cause for concern. Bat’s files had been encoded too.

“I’ve got some stuff to do,” Xero announced walking back to the living room to gather her belongings.

“If you’re planning to clean out your place, be careful,” Rielle cautioned. Xero just looked at her. Of course that had been her intention, but the fact that syscop surmised as much and seemed to take that knowledge in stride bothered her. “Well it’s what I’d do if I were you,” she slyly added, looking up into frowning blue eyes.

“Right,” Xero said flatly, unable to tear her eyes away from the younger woman.

“You might as well leave the Iguana here,” Rielle offered. “Pick it up later, Argo isn’t any bother.” Rielle offered, shy and uncertain once more.

“I’ll pick him up later.” Xero agreed knowing full well Rielle was looking for an excuse to see her again. “If you find out anything else, you can let me know then.”

Jasper Helms pushed back from his desk with a satisfied grunt. Resting his loafer-clad feet on an open drawer, he disengaged the mute button on his remote and watched the monitor screen set into the wall across from him. He tried several news channels in quick succession, a satisfied smile on his face. His thoughts were interrupted by a flashing light, indicating an incoming call on his private line. Hitting the corresponding button on his remote, he addressed the unknown caller.

“Helms, go ahead,” he announced, muting the news.

“I take it you’ve seen the news?” The voice was metallic yet had a smooth, soothing quality that the senator found unsettling.

“Yes,” Helms admitted, his pudgy fingers fiddling with his remote. “And I take it you were successful?”

“Yes. Xena is dead. Your hacker served you well. I trust you don’t need her for anything else?” The implication in the disembodied voice was clear. This was Helms’ loose end.

“I’ll have her taken care of with the rest of the house cleaning,” Helms assured the voice. “It’s time for things to move forward, old boy. A few more strategic moves and the presidency is mine. Finally, I’ll be able to get this country back on track. I can’t thank you enough Mr. Ares.”

The voice dripped boredom. “Whatever. You follow the agenda I’ve laid out and the oval office is yours. As long as you don’t disappoint me, I’ll be willing to help.”

Helms took umbrage at the superior tone, but was in no position to argue. Brashly, he decided to try again. He always felt better after having looked allies in the eye--unseen electronic voices were unknown quantities and therefore dangerous.

“Perhaps we should arrange a meeting and go over--” The line clicked, then dead silence filled the air. Helms had his answer and Mr. Ares was still an unknown. Fingering his remote, he returned to the newscasts.

Xero made her way down Old Topanga Canyon Road from the Mulholland Metro-Link station. She’d had to walk since Rielle had driven them to her apartment in Malibu the night before. While the distance wasn’t far, it was during daylight--a dangerous time to be outside. She was grateful for the baseball cap and sunglasses which shielded her sensitive blue eyes from the sun’s

destructive radiation. Regardless, Xero hurried to her destination.

The apartment complex where she lived was unusually small. Hackers as a rule hated crowds, not to mention company. With only twenty units, it was the most isolated accommodation she could find. She forced herself to stay calm as she passed the open entrance of the building, and continued on her way to the garage. The van out front marked “Biohazard Division of Public Safety” stood out like a beacon. The cops were here all right, city police as well as corporate. There was no way she’d get into her apartment now, not if the cops had it. She slipped into the shadows of the garage, hoping Bat had kept a healthy stash of goods down there.

After allowing a moment for her eyes to adjust, she took off her sunglasses and walked further into the coolness of the concrete enclosure. Out of habit, she walked toward her convertible MG. A relic from the past, it had been souped up and revamped more times than she could count. Absently she touched the British racing green hood. She’d bought the car at an estate sale. While the government maintained that the plague was over, the sheer number of estate sales on any given day hinted otherwise. Recycling had become a way of life. Possessions left by the dead were consumed by the living, just as the dead themselves were consumed by the fires of mandatory cremation.

With a resigned shrug, she turned away from her car and looked at Bat’s motorcycle. It was new, only two months old and was a state of the art hybrid. Energy cells charged by solar packing systems and powered by methane cartridges provided the muscle behind the sleek looking machine. The latest from the MRM, Mother Russia Motorworks, it was appropriately enough called the Alpha Prowler. Xero maneuvered the heavy reptile from her arm to the enclosure at the front of the bike that had been added for the animal. Argo took the change of location in stride and continued to regard the world around him with detached indifference.

Turning to the storage compartment set into the wall above the bike, Xero keyed in a code sequence, relieved that her former roommate hadn’t bothered to change the code recently. She didn’t bother to try her own storage unit. If she was assumed dead, all of her net accounts as well as everything else requiring electronic access would be frozen. For the time being, she would have to scrounge what she could from her dead associate.

A variety of emergency supplies as well as a some spare helmets were neatly stacked on the storage compartment shelves. Xero picked the one that appeared the most ‘lived in.’ As she’d hoped, a spare set of keys were tucked behind the helmet’s microphone. She pocketed the keys and grabbed a few items from the shelf. The contents of her backpack filled one of the large saddlebags attached to the back of the bike. In the other she packed a small tent, a insulite blanket, some food, a flashlight, the sun lotion and the pile of loose credit slips from a jar on one of the shelves. When Xero was certain she’d packed as much as she could, she reverently put the battered baseball cap in the saddlebag and secured the latch. She hooked the extra helmet to the back of the bike, figuring she could use the electronic parts as spares. Once she’d made sure the tool kit was where it belonged under the seat, and that her power cells were charged on full, she was ready to go.

“Stop right there,” a voice called as she readied to gun the bike’s engine.

Xero looked up to see a pair of security guards approaching. Not nearly as dangerous as real cops, they did a lot of the leg work for the more heavily armed and volatile officers. Still, security carried tasers or flamethrowers and were still dangerous. This duo was a man and a woman, and they’d entered the garage the same way she had, from the outside. “Yes?” Xero asked, keeping her expression neutral and unthreatening.

“Are you Renée Palmer?” the female guard asked, noting the numbered tag on the back of the bike.

“No,” Xero answered, shaking her head. “She’s in Santa Monica; I’m taking her the bike.”

“I’m afraid we need to impound that bike,” the man replied, walking forward carefully.

“Please step away from it.”

“Sure,” the hacker replied, straddling the bike, and putting her weight on her right leg. She’d lifted her left leg as far as the motor and cursed under her breath. “Shit,” she muttered, “the chain on my boot is stuck on the throttle valve--hold on.” She held her foot aloft, close to the motorcycles’s engine. She’d get one shot at this and was determined to make it count.

The female guard's hand instinctively went to her gun as her partner approached the hacker. In a lightning move, Xero's left heel came down on the outside of the guard's knee, a knife instantly in her hand and at the guard's neck. "Turn around!" she growled to the female guard as she pricked her partner's neck with the knife point for emphasis. The woman complied, raising her gun above her head. "Now, toss your gun over there, under that car." Her hostage hissed in pain as she jabbed him again with the knife point, relieving him of his gun in the process. She tossed the gun under the car as well after the woman complied with her request. With a powerful shove, she pushed her hostage away from the bike and slammed on the ignition. With a squeal of tires, she peeled out of the garage as the guards signaled for backup.

Xero knew she only had mere minutes to avoid capture. Fortunately, she'd had her helmet on when the guards approached, so they hadn't gotten a very good look at her. She knew the back roads of Topanga well, and chose well hidden routes to the Saddlehorn Pub & Grill. The front door was locked as it was too early for business, but she keyed in her code and pushed the motorcycle inside.

"A little early for you isn't it, Xero?" Delirium asked from her position behind the counter where she was totaling up the previous night's receipts.

"Just had an incident with a couple of SGs at the apartment. It's a goner. Did Shadow manage to get Bat's body out of there?" the hacker asked as she took off her helmet.

"She arranged for it. We got her Personal Trust out of the safe. Jenbob is looking it over. She'll report back on it at the wake tonight. Trill and Wordee are making those arrangements now," Delirium said, making a note on a data pad. "You're lucky hackers found Bat's body and not some bounty hunter."

"Why is that?" Xero asked moving the motorcycle behind the bar.

"Because they were able to verify that Bat wasn't offed by a flame thrower," the bar's owner answered.

"You mean they're convinced I didn't kill her." Delirium nodded. "I've never killed a hacker," Xero stated coldly. "Hackers don't kill other hackers-- regardless of how much we'd like to."

"That's true," Delirium allowed. "But you're on everyone's list of hackers who might."

"What am I getting out of this then?" Xero demanded. "According to system files, I'm the one who's dead anyway."

"I know that too. That's the other reason we know you didn't do it." Delirium closed the strong box of loose credit slips and slid it back into a panel behind the bar. "It's an identity mix-up, that's obvious. But it won't last long. NoJoke is hinting that he was involved. It was all over the nets this morning."

"That humorless asshole?" Xero groaned. "I'm surprised he had the balls. Talk like that'll attract Ronin bounty hunters for sure."

"I never said NoJoke was bright. He's not thinking very far ahead. He's still pissed at Bat and Blue for that incident with the tray of flaming drinks over at Club 41 last year. Getting them banned from the club just wasn't enough for him. Maybe he's trying to make Blue nervous. Not that the scrawney, pasty-assed weesle could really make anyone nervous."

"I'm with you there," Xero agreed. "I've never met the guy, but I've seen him around. Sounds like he's been sucking Helium. It won't work on Blue, she's too stable to be spooked by a wanna-be like him. Besides she and Bat paid for the damage, and only a half dozen tables caught on fire after all. NoJoke is just being stupid. Dead hackers aren't good for anyone's business. He might learn the truth of that for himself, very soon." Looking pointedly at the motorcycle, Xero changed the subject. "I need new tags for Bat's bike, and a new helmet. I'm going to find out who offed her. Think you can get 'em by tonight?"

Delirium shrugged. She didn't like the fact that Xero treated everyone like they worked for her. Still the lanky hacker made a much better ally than adversary. "I'll see what I can do," she replied.

"Thanks," Xero offered, removing one of the saddlebags from the bike. "I'll see you later."

“Take your time,” Delirium muttered when Xero was out of earshot.

Hours later Xero was ushered to a quiet booth at the Santa Monica Pier Net Cafe. She rolled her head, her neck tense from the insanity of South California’s public transportation system. She briefly considered taking a muscle relaxant, then decided against it in favor of keeping her wits sharp and senses alert. Without being asked the waitress brought her a steaming cup of coffee.

Xero glanced at her watch. In an instant she knew the time, day, date, ambient temperature and the UV radiation index. The message symbol was flashing. It was most likely clients distraught that their hired gun was apparently dead. For the moment Xero intended to play the part so she cleared all messages, unread. It was still too early to stop by the gym, but she had every intention of stopping by later to pay a visit on NoJoke.

She took a sip of coffee, grimacing at the inferior flavor compared to what she’d had at the syscop’s flat. Deciding to kill some time before heading by the gym, she set up her portable net unit into a read only configuration, hooked it up to the restaurant’s monitor, then plugged in the isolated drive Bat had backed up the previous night. Xero spent several hours poring through the files. Her muscles tensed anew as she read the playback of her roommate’s final moments, the intruder’s commands scrolling at a slow enough rate that she could see what had happened. She finally ordered a drink to take the edge off the rage she felt for the Ares entity. It was insidious and smug, and she wanted it destroyed. Still, there was a place for anger, and this wasn’t it.

Next she read through the files of Rielle MacGab. Not feeling like she’d learned anything particularly new or insightful about the syscop, she closed the file and moved to the next on the drive. After opening the memoir of Melinda Pappas, Xero sat transfixed as she read about the woman’s adventures a century before. Scans of old photos were included in the file and the hacker was not surprised that they matched the faces of her dream.

Stationing herself at an unoccupied pull-up bar on the far side of the gym, Xero let her ears wander, trying to locate NoJoke as she began her repetitions. . The sounds of equipment moving, people sparring, and crack of racketballs hitting the wall could not mask the sound she associated with self righteous indignation.

As the muscles of her arms smoothly contracted, pulling her body up with precise movements, Xero’s eyes searched the area. Several people were watching her admiringly; the hacker could feel eyes on her. She didn’t mind. The only things required for gym membership were payment per usage and clear blood scans. No one knew who she was, only that she was virus and infection free.

By her fifth repetition, a familiar, annoying voice got her attention. “She got what was coming to her if you ask me.” The nasal male voice was distinctive in the auditory clutter of the gym. It was NoJoke alright. Pleased that he was proving predictable—a deadly flaw for a hacker—Xero was genuinely surprised to find him so easily. It was rather early for most people in her profession to be up. It was also unusual to see hackers in a gym; few recognized the correlation between a healthy body and quick fingers or they enhanced the performance of their bodies with chemicals-- not exercise.

Muscles alert with a pleasant burn, Xero dropped lightly to the mat, then headed for the weight room, a wicked smile on her face.

She found him lying on his back, doing bench presses in quick succession with little weight. NoJoke continued to talk as the spotter performed his duties with bored efficiency. “Already The Bat’s clients are starting to come to me,” he bragged to the uninterested trainer as he shifted his hands slightly. Heavy straps wrapped his hands around the bar and held his wrists in proper alignment. “I’ve even been approached by Senator Helms’ election committee.”

From behind, Xero walked up to the spotter and motioned with her head for him to take a walk. He was about to protest when something in her eyes made him change his mind. “I’m ready for my next set, move the angle back some,” NoJoke called over to the unseen trainer as he gripped the weight bar. Xero smiled as she complied with his wishes. She hit the control to move the bar

back, so the hacker would be lowering the weight bar behind his head to focus on his tricep muscles. She also tripled the weight and activated the machine without warning.

“Aghhh!” NoJoke screamed as the bar slammed down, driving his hands behind his head and tearing his left shoulder from its socket. Several heads turned in his direction but no one came to his aid as they watched a lean female figure arch a leg over his body and sit on his stomach. “Get the fuck off me, you bitch,” NoJoke wailed as he struggled with the bindings on his wrists. He gasped again as any movement to his left arm jarred his tortured shoulder.

“I’m not going anywhere, NoJoke, until we’ve had a nice little chat,” Xero purred.

“Who are you?” he demanded, his voice strained as he looked up at her.

“Let’s just say I’m a friend of Bat’s. You know, the hacker you’re telling everyone you unsubbed? Didn’t you get the memo? People in your line of work aren’t supposed to kill each other. That job is reserved for bounty hunters.” Xero leaned back as she spoke, shifting more of her weight to the struggling man’s groin.

“I never said I offed her,” he gasped. “I only said that I spoke to someone who said they did it.”

“Really?” Xero asked. She teased her fingers through the expanse of chest hairs uncovered by his loose tank top. Grabbing several, she yanked, making the man twitch and scream as his arm was jarred again. “Mind telling me who?”

“Some newbie. Never seen him on the nets before. He was looking for information on Xero, the dyke that owns Bat.”

“So what’d you tell him?” Xero asked, eyes narrowing.

“What do you care?” the pained hacker wailed.

“I’m asking the questions,” Xero growled. She picked up her foot and rested it on the man’s right shoulder. While the joint hadn’t been dislocated like the other, it had been painfully torn and the pressure made him sputter, panic stricken.

“I told him that if you find Bat you find Xero, simple as that. He thanked me and recommended me for some work for Senator Helms. I swear that’s all.”

“Funny, I still haven’t heard a name,” Xero observed.

“There wasn’t a name,” the panic stricken hacker shrieked. “Just an icon. It was a sword. A sword icon, that’s all!”

“You’ve been most helpful,” Xero said calmly as she stood and stepped over NoJoke’s prone body.

“Who are you?” he pleaded, trying to make sense of what had happened to him.

“Just a dyke,” Xero said with a satisfied smirk.

Instantly, the man’s expression changed from fear to terror. Before he could open his mouth to beg, Xero had drawn her foot back and kicked him soundly in his dislocated shoulder, further decimating the joint. His cries of agony echoed through the now silent gym as she turned and walked to the locker room.

Behind the doors of the empty changing room, Xero quickly opened her locker and extracted the motorcycle’s saddle bag. Not bothering to change, she hurried from the gym. As she’d hoped, no one tried to stop or follow her.

Back on public transportation once more, she considered her options. It was time to get ready to head back to the ‘Horn. She wanted to get cleaned up before heading back, and at present her options for a shower were limited. With a thin smile, she changed trains and headed for Malibu.

Rielle pushed away from her console with a pained sigh. She’d been at it all morning and had steadily come up with more questions than answers. Even more infuriating was that she knew what to look for. She’d had a difficult enough time locating Xero online and couldn’t fathom how Ares did it. Somehow she doubted he’d been putting in the time, learning the computer craft the way she had in order to be able to track the elusive hacker. Clearly though, it had been Ares at work. While she could get glimpses of Ares in action, she didn’t have the head for military strategy necessary to uncover his ultimate aim. She’d need Xena’s mind for that and unfortunately Xena’s mind was

buried somewhere deep within that annoying hacker.

The syscop shook her head. Xero was without a doubt the most enigmatic, puzzling woman she'd ever met. She was well aware of the hacker's rap sheet and reputation. Rielle MacGab had studied Xero the criminal in anticipation of one day bringing her to justice. That was before the syscop realized that she was Gabrielle of Poteidaia. Still, her old memories haunted her. She knew that Xero was unpredictable and dangerous. The fact that this was Xena wouldn't save her unless Xero was aware of, and acknowledged, the fact.

"Rielle?" A voice called from the front door. "You'd better not be here, or you're in deep shit."

Eyes wide in surprise, Rielle looked at her watch. It was Monday the 13th. Paula was home and she was supposed to have picked her up at the airport. "*Oh no,*" she thought to herself, "*this is gonna be ugly.*"

"In here," she called out loud. No sense in denying the inevitable.

"This had better be good," Paula said walking into the dining area noting with a frown that Rielle was still dressed in her bathrobe. Rielle looked up into cold blue eyes, noting with a start just how much her lover resembled the one whose company she'd kept the previous evening. "Oh my god!" she exclaimed, when she moved to where she could get a look at the monitor. "You're *still* on this?"

"Paula, let me explain," Rielle tried to interject.

"Explain what? All that medical leave was to get this deranged fantasy out of your system. You told me two weeks ago when I went on this business trip you were going to catch up with your workload, that you were fine. Now I see that you're not at work, not picking me up at the airport, and still playing this little dissociative game of yours. I suppose the fruit trees at my apartment didn't get watered either?" Paula spun away from the woman seated at the table and headed for the kitchen. With a familiarity that bothered Rielle she heard the older woman rummage through her fridge. "And you're out of fucking spring water as well," Paula complained from the other room.

"Yeah, well, fucking springs are hard to come by," Rielle muttered under her breath.

"What was that?" Paula asked, when she returned to the dining area.

"Nothing... just nothing," Rielle said quietly.

"What the hell is that?" the taller woman exclaimed noticing the large Iguana on the dining room table, contentedly chewing on a piece of lettuce.

"I'm watching him for someone..." Rielle began then just gave up. When Paula was working up a rant, explanations only made things worse.

Paula smiled sadly and sat down next to the syscop, staying well away from the reptile. Her partners' sudden silences bothered her and knowing it was in response to her own temper made her feel all the worse. It was something they agreed to work on, and neither party had been very successful at it. "I'm sorry," she said gently. "The spring water thing was out of line." She tossed her head, flipping a long mane of black hair behind her back. With an inward groan Rielle realized that Paula had been an adequate substitute for Xena. That was, before she'd met the real thing. "I just wish you could see how worried I am about you," Paula continued, drawing Rielle from her thoughts. "I've been more patient than most, Rielle, but I have needs too. You wanted a short term contract, I gave it to you. You wanted to keep separate residences, I gave you that as well-- even though it's a stupid waste of rent. But this whole past life thing-- you can't expect me to calmly sit back and watch you rave like a lunatic. You need help, Rielle."

"No, I don't," Rielle protested, only to be interrupted by the chime at the front door. Both women stood to answer it. "This *is* my house," Rielle said, a hint of warning in her voice.

"True," Paula allowed. "But at least *I'm* fully dressed." She quickly crossed the room to the front door, with Rielle not far behind. As the front door slid away, Paula blinked at the sight that greeted her. Almost as if looking into a shabbily dressed mirror, Rielle's lover stood face to face with a woman of similar in height and build.

"Can I help you?" Paula asked the other woman, wishing she were looking down instead of straight at her.

Xero regarded her with a bored expression, then glanced behind her to where Rielle stood wrapped in her bathrobe. "I was wondering if Rielle could come out and play," she replied dryly.

"Xero, come in," Rielle said from behind Paula.

"Xero?" Paula asked, glaring at the newcomer.

With a quick glance, the hacker's eyes flicked up and down, taking in the stranger and instantly dismissing her. Paula was tall and dressed in a sporty traveling suit. The latest in easy care fabrics, it looked like it had been designed to highlight every physical asset of the attractive woman. She stood, severely as possible, with arms crossed against her chest. Long black hair was combed and neat with crisp black bangs drawing attention to her light blue eyes.

One glance at those narrow eyes and pursed lips and Xero knew all too well what this woman thought of her. The looks were common enough. A social gulf existed between children raised in orphanages and those raised in old fashioned families. Xero and others like her wore their rough dysfunctionality like badges of honor, while Paula and her ilk found them stubborn, ungrateful delinquents. Xero hated her instantly. When the hacker turned her eyes to Rielle, they dropped their coldness and danced with amusement. "I was wondering if I could borrow your shower? I've got that little soiree tonight and..."

"And you need to pick up Argo. Of course, of course," Rielle said as she hurried Xero toward the bathroom. "Here let me get you some towels. Be right back, Paula," she added as she lead the hacker out of sight.

"So the cat wants to play when the girlfriend is outta town?" Xero whispered from behind the syscop.

"That isn't my girlfriend," Rielle corrected her. "That's my wife. We're three years into a five year contract and it isn't working. Mind if we change the subject?" Rielle didn't look at her as she withdrew fresh towels from the cabinet.

"Ah, sure," Xero offered gently as she accepted the towels. "Thanks for the shower, I... ah... had to leave the gym in a hurry. So, does Paula work for Archive too? Let me guess, Marketing? That or Technology Development."

Rielle frowned. "Marketing. And she's a really nice person so leave her alone. The thing at the gym, you didn't kill anyone did you?"

"No," Xero said shaking her head. "He's not dead, yet."

"Am I still invited to the wake?" Rielle asked hopefully, trying to avoid another conversation she thought best not be explored.

Xero shrugged. "Sure, it's just a wake. Hell, even bobs are allowed in the 'Horn for that. But I think your Xero clone in the other room might not approve," the hacker added with a wink and a grin.

"I knew Paula before I even met you, and she doesn't really have any say in this anyway."

"Maybe so," Xero allowed. "But she doesn't seem to be what you want. Do you have any idea what it is you want Rielle? Or who?" The hacker's voice was soft, but firm and Rielle blushed in response.

"Get cleaned up and I'll get dressed. I'll be ready to go when you are," she said, turning away from the hacker. Xero nodded and retreated into the bathroom, wishing she could be a fly on the wall for the battle that was surely about to ensue.

To Xero's disappointment, Rielle's wife was absent when she reemerged from the bathroom. The syscop was checking the charge levels on her mobie unit, absently running her free hand through her long hair. Xero grinned in appreciation of the attractive woman. The syscop was dressed smartly; a black silk shirt tucked into tight blue jeans and black western boots. She picked up a leather jacket of a more professional cut than Xero's biker jacket when she heard the hacker enter the room. Xero was dressed in a clean t-shirt that she'd stolen from the gym, her jeans and biker boots, the chains of which rattled softly as she walked. On her head, she wore the Mickey Mouse baseball hat she'd picked up the previous evening. "Where did Mrs. Syscop go?" Xero asked as she lifted the jacket from Rielle's hand and held it out for the smaller woman.

“She left,” Rielle replied, her voice tight as she slipped her arm through a sleeve.

“I can see that,” Xero observed, gently pulling the syscop’s hair over the jacket’s collar. “I take it she has a problem with you chasing other women?” The hacker’s blue eyes danced with amusement.

Rielle frowned, as she turned to glare up at the hacker. “I’m trying to thwart the designs of Ares, not chase you. I realize you’re having a hard time getting that through your thick head. The only one of us doing the chasing, hacker, is you.”

“Lemme see,” the taller woman countered good naturedly, “you buy me a drink, dinner, invite me to your place, ask me to spend the night, and I’m the one chasing you?”

“Yes, you’re just being more subtle about it,” Rielle said, finally laughing at the absurdity of her comment. Xero rolled her eyes.

“You’re a fucking lunatic,” the hacker muttered as she followed the syscop out of the apartment.

They rode in companionable silence along the coast. Argo, perched on the dashboard, looked from syscop to hacker favoring them with glares of equal displeasure. Rielle stole occasional glances at her companion who gazed at the Pacific Ocean, her expression unreadable. “I’m not crazy, you know,” she said finally, breaking the silence.

Xero turned to look at her, noting flutter of the syscop’s eyelashes as she watched the road. “You’re acting pretty crazy to me,” she replied. “Is this all some mid-life crisis?”

“Christ, Xero, I’m not old enough to have a mid-life crisis!” Rielle groaned. “I know it sounds insane but the facts are simple. My life didn’t make much sense, had odd inconsistencies to it. I met Paula four years ago, and things were good but something still didn’t seem to fit. When I started to get the rest of my memory back, things made sense. Now that I know all of who I am-- I finally feel sane, but everyone else thinks I’m nuts.”

“And you think I’m going to go along for the ride. How can you be so sure I’m who you think I am?” Xero asked, still baffled by the syscop’s assertions.

“Before I knew I was Gabrielle, I studied you. Bringing online felons to justice is what syscops do. I’ve read about your exploits. When Gabrielle’s memories began to surface, it became clear how much of Xena is in you. So much so, that I’m convinced you are... well you.” Rielle sighed and turned off of the PCH onto the back roads of Topanga. “That was when I started having problems with Paula. She’s convinced that my ‘obsession’ as she calls it, stems from the fact that I couldn’t bring you in as a syscop.”

“You don’t think there is any merit to that?” Xero asked wryly.

Rielle grinned. “Oh, but I could bring you in, Xero. And nearly retire on the bounty Archive has offered for you alone.”

“Yeah, right,” the hacker muttered dismissively.

“Don’t belittle my abilities,” Rielle shot back hotly. “Remember it was me who tapped you while you were in the middle of a heist. Fact of the matter is, Xero, that I was sloppy on purpose. I wanted you to notice that I was watching you. I’ve watched your last three jobs. If I’d wanted to bring you in I could have tapped you on fixing the farming contract, the medical insurance swindle, or tweaking the bank records of your client in Mexico City.”

Xero’s eyes narrowed dangerously.

“You don’t see me nervous about wandering into a hacker stronghold either do you?” Rielle pressed. “Don’t think I don’t know syscops aren’t spotted from time to time and dealt the hacker brand of justice. Believe it or don’t Xero, but I tapped you because I’m better than anyone else. I could have done it any time, I’ve been watching you.”

A memory surfaced. Xero could feel the oppressiveness of the orphanage, and the humiliation of discovering that the mirror on the dresser across from her bed was really one way glass into the headmaster’s living room. “I don’t like to be watched,” she said quietly, danger threading her voice.

“I’m sorry,” Rielle replied. “But I had to make sure of who you were before I approached

you. There is no doubt in my mind Xero. You've a cunning mind and a rare genius for strategy. Tell me, if you wanted to change the way the world was, recreate it according to your design, how would you go about it?"

"Right now?" Xero asked gamely. When Rielle nodded she paused to think. "I'd trash the communications system. Do something to compromise everyone else's trust in it." Xero smiled as she watched the syscop consider her words. "Then I'd make leading hackers on a felony," she finished with a grin.

Rielle started to nod, then glared at her companion sharply. "You just don't think this is serious, do you?"

"Fuck yes, I think it's serious," Xero shot back. "I'm the one who's dead on the nets, remember? I just think you're a few fries short of a happy meal, that's all."

"Did you find out anything about your friend?" Rielle asked, changing the subject as she pulled into a secured parking structure several blocks from the Saddlehorn Pub & Grill.

The hacker's tone turned somber. "Yeah. I know what killed her. Wait 'till we get to the 'Horn. I'll explain then." Absently she reached back into the sportscar and picked up the iguana. Positioning the reptile across her shoulders, she let it's long tail drape around her arm and headed down the street. Enjoying the coolness of full night, the two walked in silence to the 'Horn. Once inside, Xero deposited the reptile on the long bar who scampered over to his usual perch near the warm lights. Grabbing a cocktail napkin she wrote down the make, model and identification tag numbers of Rielle's car, then handed it to Addict, the bartender.

"What was that about?" Rielle asked as she ordered a drink.

"If someone comes looking for you, an enraged spouse perhaps tossing out descriptions, I'd like to know about it," Xero replied picking up her beer.

"So you've got people scanning the nets for everyone in the club?" Rielle wondered.

"Always," Addict replied, overhearing the question. She handed Rielle her beer and added with a smile, "it's for your protection. Spouses are always after Xero."

Xero ignored the remark and led the syscop deeper into the club. Although it was early, roughly nine, it was already quite crowded. A band was busy on one side of the large room setting instruments and sound equipment up on a well worn stage. Several groups of people were milling about, and as Xero had mentioned earlier, a few men could be spotted in the crowd.

Catching sight of Xero, several people excused themselves from their conversations and headed over to intercept her. Wordlessly one of the women led the small group to a private room in the back of the bar. "Who's she?" the woman asked when Xero stepped aside to let Rielle enter the room ahead of her.

"She's with me," the tall hacker replied.

"She left with Xero last night, Delirium," Ska added, joining the group.

"Rielle." The syscop introduced herself, extending her hand to the bar's owner.

"Okay," Delirium replied firmly returning the handshake. She didn't offer to make introductions.

"We're sorry to hear about Bat," another woman said looking at Xero. She was muscular, with blue eyes and steel gray hair and wore a loose fitting tank top. There was something vaguely familiar about her and Rielle thought furiously to put a name with the face. In fact, several of the women standing around the room looked familiar. While she suspected they'd all been at the bar last night, her attention had been so fully occupied by Xero that she'd failed to notice anyone else.

"Yeah, Blue," Xero replied. "I'm sorry, too. This is bad news for all of us."

Rielle fought to keep recognition from her face. With that one name the syscop suddenly recognized most of the assembled group. They were all prominently featured on the Most Wanted Lists circulated by corporate security teams.

Blue's continued to look at Xero, her eyes narrowing in anger. "I mean that I'm sorry Bat's gone because she was a friend. Not because she's one less slave for you or it represents a new danger to our profession."

Xero looked at the shorter woman. "You have your reasons, I have mine," she said calmly."

“Do we know yet what killed her?” a gentle voice asked, making a desperate attempt to diffuse the mounting tension in the room.

“Yeah, Wordee, we know some,” Delirium replied. “Shadow arranged for a team to get Bat’s remains. There wasn’t any family to notify...”

“What about her ex-husband, Henry?” Wordee asked, her tone a marked contrast between the tension arcing between Blue and Xero. Wordee radiated a charm and kindness that put the syscop at ease. Her face had the faint lines of one who laughed and smiled often. Still, like the rest of the hackers, she wasn’t exactly welcoming of the newcomer either.

“She’s only seen him twice since she started working for me. After the last visit she made it clear she didn’t want to speak to him again-- ever.” Xero supplied. “What about LN, Amazon Julie, Robin and the others? They should be hearing this.”

“Robin isn’t coming by tonight because Bat hated her,” Delirium explained. “The others will be by later--jobs I expect. We’ll fill them in.”

Xero nodded, “Fine.”

The bar owner nodded and continued. “It was an inside job all right. She was fried. No traces of tasers or flamethrowers. We all know Bat wasn’t sloppy. She was grounded, and since she lost her eye, she’d gotten better than anyone else at spotting booby traps. Whatever it was that did her in has to be new-tech.”

Xero pulled a small mini drive from the pocket of her biker jacket and set it down in the middle of the table. “I’ve pulled stuff from Bat’s last back up and put it on this mini-drive. There’s a 35 gigabyte file--her last minutes alive. It’s new-tech all right, stuff I’ve never seen before. Visual coding that transmits to the brain at an amazing rate. I couldn’t read much of it, maybe a med-tech could. Still, I think it was sending visual command that made Bat’s internal systems break down.”

“That sounds like the government’s Pipeline Project,” a woman leaning against the far wall observed. She nodded to the woman standing next to her. “I thought it was canceled.”

Xero looked at Jenbob, then Deb. She nodded. “It was, too volatile this close to an election. Still, I don’t think this is government. Theoretically, the opposition in Congress shouldn’t have access to that type of system firepower without tipping off those in charge. Until we get to the bottom of this, pass the word--if anyone is on the nets and gets tapped or called by any entity named Ares, drop from the system. The thing uses a sword icon. Don’t wait to back up or cover your tracks, just get out.”

“Might as well send this to Shadow,” Delirium suggested, picking up the mini drive. “See what she can find out.”

“I’ll drop it off,” Trillbaby offered. “I’ve got a job out that way tonight anyway.”

“Speaking of clients,” Wordee said, putting another mini drive on the table. “Trill and I picked this up out of Bat’s vault today. She left the usual job notes. She copped to a total of 68 completed jobs.”

Suddenly all eyes snapped back to Xero, and the expressions weren’t friendly. Rielle realized the implication of the admission. Xero had been quite the taskmaster for her associate to have worked so much in such a short span of time.

“Is news of Bat’s death spreading beyond the hacker nets?” Rielle asked quietly, diverting the hostile looks from the tall woman at her side.

Blue blinked, surprised to hear Rielle speak and not knowing quite what to make of her. “We’re were monitoring the general news nets,” she replied for the benefit of everyone. “Xero’s ‘death’ is news in some circles but that’s about all.”

“Latest is, NoJoke was killed at the gym,” Deb commented.

“No shit?” Xero replied, ignoring the look Rielle was giving her.

“Don’t worry, not that you would,” Deb said with a grin. “You didn’t kill him, although at least two people spotted you at the gym today. They checked for chemicals and he was clean. They found him in a comm booth. Online to Senator Helms’ camp, dead as a doornail-- same as the others, fried extra crispy.”

“So what do we do?” Jenbob wondered aloud.

“We have Bat’s wake,” Wordee replied.

“Eventually we need to get to the bottom of this...” Jenbob persisted.

“I have every intention of getting to the bottom of this,” Xero said evenly, cutting into the smaller woman’s assertion. Smoothly, she turned her attention to the bar owner once again. “You’ve been able to get new tags for the bike?”

Delirium nodded. “Yeah, for all the good that’s going to do you. It isn’t like you can use the nets you know.”

“Maybe the mighty Xero is thinking of holing up somewhere,” Blue voiced the question they’d all been thinking.

Xero turned her attention back to the muscular woman and looked down at her coldly. “You’ll just have to wait and find out, won’t you?” she replied softly.

“That’s enough you two,” Wordee admonished, stepping between them. “We’ve got a wake to start. Leave Bat her closing credits.”

Rielle followed Xero from the private room back into the main bar area. Her head was swimming. She was walking through a virtual crowd of ‘who’s who’ in the world of online outlaws. “There’s a fortune in online bounties in here,” she murmured to herself. “I could retire on the collars in the back room alone.”

Xero stopped abruptly and turned around, her eyes dancing, yet still dangerous. “Now you’re casing my home,” she whispered, leaning close to the syscop’s ear. “I don’t recommend it.”

“Sorry,” Rielle murmured back. “Professional habit.”

The hacker chuckled as a genuine grin spread across her face. “I guess I deserved that.”

Before Xero could say anything more, the whine of an old fashioned microphone silenced the club. A woman tapped the microphone making sure it was on. “Uh, hi. Bat left explicit instructions as to the outdated, deranged music she wanted played at her wake...” a muffled groan could be heard throughout the club. “I know, I know. But it’s what she wanted. Before we get to that though, ah... does anyone want to say anything?”

“Yeah, Trill. I’ve got something to say,” Ska Mayhem called out, handing her tray of drinks to Lani.

“Sorry Ska,” Trillbaby replied looking down at her notes. “It says in her will that she heard quite enough from you when she was alive.” The room erupted in laughter, which Ska finally joined, toasting her friend who it seemed had finally managed the last word. When the laughter died down Trillbaby picked up an electric guitar and looked inquiringly at Xero. With a slight nod, she withdrew her arm from Rielle’s shoulder and headed for the stage.

The room was quiet, and expectantly tense as the patrons waited to see what the notorious hacker would do. She slung the guitar strap over her shoulder and shifted the instrument into a comfortable position. Briefly, she wondered what her dead associate might like to hear. The fact that a room full of people were watching didn’t matter. This was a private moment between her and Bat. The others were incidental.

She didn’t say a word as she began to play. The tune was simple, and instantly recognizable as “Amazing Grace.” Just the sort of musical send-off the Bat would have appreciated. The first time through, Xero embellished little, keeping true to the simple notes of the venerable melody. The next refrain her fingers danced across the strings as she bent wailing blues riffs out of the age old tune. Finally she began again, this time the blistering sounds of vintage heavy metal erupted from the club speaker system. She held the last wailing note, the keening cry from tortured strings as the drummer tapped a four count with her sticks. For one final rendition, the band joined in for an “Amazing Grace” that could bring a tear to the eye of any elderly head-banger.

When they finished the club erupted into applause louder than the din of the music. Xero handed the guitar back to one of the musicians and without a word she left the stage. “Who’s the band?” the hacker asked as she joined Rielle and several others at a booth a short distance from the dance floor.

“Box Of Hammers,” Ska supplied taking Xero’s credit slips in exchange for another beer.

“Catchy name,” Rielle offered.

Ska shrugged. "They change it all the time. Last week they were The Oozing Juicers, before that, Riding Topless. But Bat liked 'em, so we asked 'em to play. By the way, Xero-- Delirium says to go pick up your cycle tags and feed the lizard."

With a nod, the lanky hacker eased out of the booth and headed to the back of the bar.

Music started up and couples began to dance. The song was slow and tortured but the dancers didn't seem to mind.

"I should get combat pay for an evening of enduring Bat's music," Ska grumbled wandering off to take more drink orders.

Jenbob chuckled. "This is the tame stuff. U2's "You're So Cruel" isn't nearly as difficult to dance to as the theme song from Underdog."

"Oh god, you don't think they'll go that far?" Wordee asked, clearly worried. "I suppose show tunes are too much to hope for."

"Care to dance?" a new voice inquired.

Rielle had been looking down at the table but felt the words directed at her. She looked up into the smiling face of a tall, handsome man. "No way," Blue answered before Rielle got a chance to speak. "She's here with Xero."

"You think Xero's going to ask me to dance?" Rielle wondered out loud, not at all pleased the others saw her as the hacker's property.

"Well, no," Jenbob said, shrugging her shoulders. "Xero doesn't dance."

"Then it would be silly to wait for her," Rielle decided. She stood and taking the man's offered arm, walked with him to the dance floor.

"Another public brawl," Wordee groaned. "Oh goodie."

"I bet ten Euros that she lands a solid punch on Xero before Xero decks the big guy." Blue put a credit slip on the table as other heads turned in interest and began to place bets.

Rielle realized absently that for making a point, she couldn't have found a more obvious partner. Not only did her dance partner tower over her, they were one of the few opposite sex couples on the dance floor. Still, he was a good dancer, and Rielle still felt more comfortable in observing the other hackers from a distance.

"What's your name?" she heard him ask.

"Rielle," she answered. "And you?"

He smiled down at her as he guided her across the dance floor. "Barron," he answered. "I'm not a technically a hacker, if you're wondering why you haven't heard of me. I just work for 'em."

Rielle smiled back. "I'm not a hacker either," she assured her dance partner.

His eyes widened in surprise. "Unusual for Xero to date someone not in the business. I guess you haven't been seeing her for long."

"We just met--" Rielle answered as she saw her companion approach.

"Mind if I cut in?" Xero asked pleasantly, looking Barron in the eye.

"No problem," he replied with a grin stepping aside and opening his arms to the hacker. Xero grinned, but moved past him to take Rielle into her arms.

"It was worth a try," he muttered as he walked back to the bar.

"I thought you didn't dance?" Rielle asked as she followed the movements of the hacker's body.

"I'm unpredictable," Xero replied with a smirk.

"Yeah, unpredictable," the syscop said as she turned her head to hide her grin. The sense of completeness she found in the hacker's arms was almost overpowering. Without even the slightest thought, their movements had synchronized and they toured the dance floor as one. It was in marked contrast to the music coming from the stage.

"Kind of an odd song to be dancing to." Rielle commented as she leaned in a little closer to the hacker.

"You're So Cruel?" Xero asked. "I don't think so. As love songs go, it's honest."

"I have a feeling your hacker buddies wouldn't consider you an authority on love." Rielle teased gently. More certain than ever that she held the soul of her lover in her arms, she let her hand

drift under the biker jacket to brush against the hacker's t-shirt clad back. If the hacker noticed she didn't show it.

Xero glanced down at her dance partner, acutely aware of the hand that rested

softly against her back. With an inward groan, she remembered why she'd been at the 'Horn the previous night. Rielle's gentle touch did nothing to quell the lust that was thrumming through her veins. "They'd be right," Xero agreed gamely. "I don't believe in love."

"You think it's a trick nature plays on us to reproduce?" Rielle asked, having an odd suspicion that she'd heard the phrase somewhere before.

"Who says you need love for that?" the hacker replied, shifting her steps to let Rielle take the lead. "A simple trip to the gen lab for whatever you're lacking does the job."

"It's so ironic," Rielle mused. "Before The Plague there's a voluntary moratorium on births from the overcrowding and now... the government can't do enough to help in the process."

"Yeah," the hacker muttered, noncommittal. She tried to follow the conversation but it was useless. She was in worse shape than she'd realized and considered her options to remedy the situation. She'd already decided not to seduce the syscop...yet. The sudden appearance of The Angry Spouse had made her cautious. She could always take matters into her own hands, so to speak, but that option lacked appeal as well. What she wanted was release with someone else. Her clear blue eyes quickly scanned past a knot of groupies standing near the bathroom. Stopping herself, she took a second look and made eye contact with an attractive young woman with reddish blond hair. Almost the color of Rielle's, she decided. Mind made up, she returned her attention to her dance partner as the singer sang the final haunting refrain.

"To stay with you I'd be a fool. Oh, sweetheart, you're so cruel." As the singer's voice silenced, the dancers slowly drifted to a stop. The singer picked up a different guitar and the band launched into a faster song as Xero led Rielle from the dance floor. Vada and Verda, the notorious hacking twins, had joined Blue at the booth. Verda made room for Rielle who sat down looking at her dance partner expectantly.

"I've got something to take care of," Xero mumbled to Rielle, not quite meeting her eyes. "I'll be back later." Rielle watched, confused as the hacker headed back out across the dance floor toward the bathrooms.

"I don't believe it," Blue muttered in a disgusted tone as Xero conversed briefly with a groupie and the two headed into the bathroom.

"What?" Rielle asked.

"It's nothing," Vada replied, shooting a silencing glance to Blue. "Let's have another round and play some darts."

Lacking other options and unwilling to strike out on her own in the unfamiliar club, Rielle joined the hackers for darts. She glanced back toward the bathroom shortly after Xero entered to see a number of women leaving in a hurry. She drank her beer and played several rounds of darts before her curiosity got the better of her. She was about to head for the bathroom herself, when Blue's restraining hand stopped her.

"Trust me, you don't want to do that," the muscular hacker warned in a tone that it wasn't a suggestion.

"It's not worth it," Verda added.

"And besides, it's your turn," Trillbaby concluded passing the syscop the darts. "Someone's got to beat LN tonight."

Rielle couldn't help but laugh at how hard the hackers were trying to keep her mind off of Xero. Before long they began to talk to each other about jobs they were working on, and about the reason they were at the 'Horn that night.

It was a new perspective for the syscop. She knew that hackers were people just like everyone else, but this was the first time she'd ever interacted with them socially. Assuming that she was a hacker too, they asked for her opinion when arguments erupted about equipment. Jenbob

discussed the finer points of antiquated hardware and Wordee quoted lines from movies. Rielle joined in and in no time was joking and teasing as if she'd known them for years.

It was several beers later when they all finally collapsed back in the booth before Xero emerged from the bathroom. The groupie had emerge first, crying, and had left the bar at a dead run with several of her friends in tow. The dark-haired hacker had emerged later, stopping by the bar to get another beer before heading back to the booth.

Since most of their group had dispersed, Rielle sat alone on one side of the table across from Blue and Jenbob. Xero slid into the space next to her, casually draping an arm around her shoulders. Her hand was cold and slightly damp. Rielle also noticed that her hair was wet near her forehead and temples, her baseball hat having been tucked into a back pocket, as if she'd just washed her hands and face.

"What happened to her?" Blue asked nodding in the direction of the recently departed groupie.

"She misunderstood the nature of our relationship," Xero offered, taking a deep draught from her beer.

Blue glanced at Rielle briefly before looking coldly at the hacker once more. "You're a real asshole Xero, you know that," she said sliding out of the seat. Xero only shrugged, denying nothing.

"Rielle, you've got class. You could do a lot better than Xero," Jenbob added as she followed suit and left the couple alone at the booth.

"You've got quite a way with people," Rielle observed taking a sip from her bottled water.

"So why aren't you listening to them and heading for the hills?" the hacker asked as she leaned back and closed her eyes.

"Because you being a complete asshole doesn't convince me you aren't Xena." Rielle didn't feel terribly angry at the hacker's behavior and thought about it. She was jealous on one level, and angry at whatever the hacker might have said to make the young woman leave the pub in tears, but other than that, she didn't feel that she had much room to comment. Idly, she wondered if Xero had in some way tried to protect her. Perhaps if knowing about her contract with Paula had forced attentions on the groupie that she'd seemed all too willing to share with the her the previous night. The penalties for adultery were quite stiff. Idly, she couldn't help but wonder about what she'd just missed.

Rielle's thoughts were interrupted as Xero shifted her body slightly, leaning against the smaller woman for some support. In moments her breathing evened out and she was fast asleep. The syscop shook her head with a small smile, noting the protective and possessive arm draped around her shoulders. With a resigned sigh she leaned into the biker jacket and dozed off, the scent of leather filling her senses. Just like she remembered.

Xero blinked, startled at the crisp air filling her lungs. She squinted her eyes at the bright sun, wondering what the hell she was doing outside during the day. A new sensation registered and she looked down at her feet. Once again she was barefoot, this time standing on damp grass. Looking around, she was amazed at how green the vegetation was. She continued to stare, unable to decide which color was more intense, the piercing blue of the sky or the vibrant green of the grass.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" a gentle Southern voice said approaching from behind.

Xero spun around to face Melinda Pappas as she walked across the field. No longer dressed in a tuxedo, she wore a maroon skirt, cream blouse and tailored jacket. Her simple sophistication made the hacker nervous. "Where are we?" Xero asked. "Or should I ask where I'm dreaming we are."

"This is Amphipolis," Mel replied not specifying which question she was answering.

"So where's the loudmouth?" Xero wondered as she looked around for Mel's companion.

The Southerner frowned which quickly softened into a smile. "I asked Janice to let me spend some time alone with you. I'm afraid we don't have the time for you two to butt heads." She nodded toward a collection of simple houses. "Why don't you come with me, take a look at the city?"

Xero shrugged and followed the woman. "I read your book this afternoon," she offered absently. Mel arched her eyebrows in silent question. "It was all right, I guess. Things were pretty primitive a hundred years ago. All that

digging around...

"It was hard work," Mel agreed, her smile was genuine and wistful. "But we loved it so much. I remember watching Janice as she'd spend hours trying to remove a single pottery shard, or glancing up to see her watching me as I worked on a translation."

"There is something I don't quite understand," Xero ventured and waited until she had Mel's attention before continuing. "If I'm supposed to be you--"

"Not me, Xena," Mel corrected gently.

Xero nodded. "Right, Xena. If I'm supposed to be Xena, what was that bit with Janice performing some sort of Amazon rite?"

Mel began to blush a little. "Well...ah... I was vague on purpose in my memoirs. What Janice actually did was use dynamite to blow up the bones of Xena and Gabrielle."

"No shit?" Xero said, impressed.

"I swear your language is as bad as Janice's," Mel muttered, then shook it off. "It should have been done as soon as Gabrielle died," she continued. "But Valaska was watching too closely. Your physical remains were like an anchor keeping you tied in place," Mel said as they walked between two rows of buildings, slowly winding their way deeper into the city.

"So if that hadn't happened... what?" Xero asked.

"I guess you'd be like a ghost or apparition. Trying to fight the battle with Ares through others-- as you did through me a hundred years ago. While it worked then, I think you'd be at a definite disadvantage now." Mel stopped at a building. While things had been quiet as they spoke she gradually heard sounds increase and realized that the street had slowly become populated, the activity outside this building quite significant.

"What are we doing here?" the hacker asked, looking in an open window. It was obviously a pub of some sort.

"You're going to get reacquainted with yourself." Mel explained.

Xero turned and looked at the Southerner sharply. "I'm sorry to Scully you, but if this is like a scene out of Scrooged you're going to be disappointed."

Mel frowned, her bright blue eyes smoldering a little. "Your generation should really open a book once in awhile. Scrooged was based on A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens, and no this isn't like that. There's no way to undo the events that have happened. I'm not going to show you some shadowy possibility of a future for you to undo. What you're going to see can't be changed and I can't show you any potential future. I believe you're familiar with the phrase to know who you are, it's important to know who've you've been?"

Xero smiled in spite of herself. "Yeah, Star Trek: Deep Space Nine the episode was "Facets." We used to watch that at the orphanage when we could sneak the access codes. But you know that because you're in my head, right?"

Mel shook her head in exasperation, pointing to an empty area just beyond the tavern. "Just watch, okay?"

Xero did as she was asked and in moments three small children came running across the lot from the copse of trees beyond, two boys and a girl. The oldest couldn't have been more than ten years old, the youngest about six.

"Toris, give it back!" the small blond boy shouted at the larger dark haired lad in front.

"If you're such a great warrior Lyceus, then take it," Toris taunted holding a wooden sword high over his head well out of reach of the other boy.

Xero wasn't sure how she knew it but there was no question that the girl, seven years old at this time, was Xena. Stunned she stared at her younger self, watching events that were so foreign yet felt familiar just the same.

"Toris," Xena said evenly. "Give Lyceus his sword back-- now!"

"You can't fight all his battles for him, Xena," Toris admonished. He kicked at a pile of fresh cow dung in the blond boy's direction, sending chunks of the moist excrement flying. Several hit young Lyceus squarely in the face and he began to cry, howling at the horror of it. At the sound Xena sprang into action, taking a running dive at Toris. She tucked into a tight somersault and rolled into her older brother's legs, knocking him down, face first into the cow patty.

Unscratched, Xena stood and picked up her younger brother's wooden sword, leaving Toris where he lay. She turned her back on him and walked over to where Lyceus fought to get his tears under control.

"It's not that bad Ly," she said softly, gently wiping the excrement off her brother's face. "Trust me, you look fine." She smiled at her brother. For such a young boy he was overly concerned about his looks. Aside from their mock

sword fights, he hated to do anything that involved excessive dirt. As she handed him his sword, his eyes grew wide in alarm. Xena winked, then spun out of range just as a handful of manure came sailing towards where she'd been. Harmlessly, it sailed over Lyceus' shoulder.

"Nice try," Xena taunted her brother who, with manure matted into his dark hair, roared in fury. In moments the two children were rolling back and forth on the dirt yelling obscenities at the tops of their young lungs. Xero chuckled as she observed the fight, wondering who was going to win.

"Remember this?" Mel asked, a concerned expression on her face.

"Not at all," Xero replied with a grin. "But I'll take Xena for ten credits."

The ruckus on the lot roused the patrons of the tavern. Men scrambled outside to investigate the noise and came to an abrupt halt when they discovered it was Xena and Toris... again.

"I'll take Xena this time for three dinars," one farmer muttered, digging into his pouch. Lyceus hurried over and accepted the man's money with a smile.

"Naw," another man countered. "Xena's been lucky the last three times. Toris is bound to win this time for sure. I'll cover your bet."

Suddenly the gamblers were making almost as much noise as the combatants as they placed bets. Humiliation forgotten, Lyceus hurried among the men collecting their money and noting their bets. Everyone agreed that the young lad had an uncanny memory.

"What is the meaning of this?" a female voice boomed, silencing all but the two fighting children. "Tucker, will you please separate the children," she said with a frown looking pointedly at the huge blacksmith who had just placed his bet. With a sheepish grin, he headed toward the struggling children. Pulling them apart and picking up a child in each arm he marched over to the horse troughs and unceremoniously dumped each child into one. Fights were so frequent between Toris and Xena that a second trough had been added for that very purpose.

Sputtering and furious, each child gasped for air, pulling wet hair out of their eyes. Toris was clearly worse for wear. He sported a blackening eye and bleeding lip. Xena had a scuffed shoulder and scraped knees, but recovered from the battle more quickly. Beaming proudly, Lyceus passed out the winnings to the men who chosen his sister. Once again, they'd beaten their older brother.

Cyrene looked sternly at both children. "I'm ashamed of both of you," she admonished. The assembled farmers hung their heads, knowing they'd not be able to sneak back to their drinks until the matter was settled. "I'm sorry to say that the world is not yet a place where you can afford the hatred of a sibling. When will you two learn that someday the three of you are going to have to depend on each other."

Xero frowned at the scene and pushed past several farmers to get into the inn. They unconsciously moved out of the way, as if they knew she was there but weren't really paying any attention. "What was that all about?" Mel asked when the hacker had taken a seat at a table far from the sounds of motherly lecturing.

"I just didn't feel like listening to her get yelled at, okay?"

Mel shrugged. "It's okay," she offered gently. "Mind telling me why?"

Xero's blue eyes flashed over to Mel's. "No," she answered simply, leaving no room for comment. Moments later the farmers shuffled in and in short order carried on as if there'd been no disturbance. "Can we go now?" Xero asked.

"Not quite," Mel answered, staring at a doorway that lead to a back room.

"Closing time!" an older Xena said as she carried an empty tray to the closest table. She appeared to be fifteen years old, strong and confident in her bearing. She picked up the empty, and mostly empty mugs depositing them on the tray with practiced efficiency. With a minimum of grumbling the patrons of the tavern filed out until Mel and Xero were the only ones who remained.

"I take it she can't see me?" Xero asked.

"No. What would be the point?" Mel replied.

Xero nodded and continued to watch the adolescent Xena go about the tasks of closing up the tavern.

A handsome young man burst through the door, grinning from ear to ear. "I've got it, Xe!" he shouted, proudly waving a rolled scroll in one hand.

"Great work Lyceus," Xena beamed after giving him a quick hug. "Did you have any trouble?"

"Naw," he replied with a wink. "You were right, Maphias was being too cautious. The guards were only too happy to part with a useless map considering the other spoils they had to worry about. Xena grinned, helping her brother unroll the weathered hide. "Along here, this corridor," Lyceus explained pointing to a series of dots, "are the

villages that Cortese has already sacked. He's gotten overconfident, taking each one in turn like that. If we can get the villages of Rhea and Thithis to join us, we shouldn't have any problem turning the thug back."

Xena looked critically at the map, nodding at her brother's words. "He isn't going to expect us to fight," she agreed. "He knows most of the men left two years ago to join the Athenian army. With the army of Amphipolis fighting Philip of Macedon, he thinks we're defenseless."

"And that will be his undoing," Lyceus agreed emphatically. "I bet we could take him ourselves, even if we didn't have..."

"No, Lyceus!" Xena cut in hotly. She took a breath and began more gently. "Lyceus, we need the help of Rhea and Thithis. If we take on Cortese on our own, the best we can hope for is to give him a bloody nose..."

"Sorry I'm late," a lanky young man said as he opened the door to the tavern.

"Glad you made it, Maphias," Lyceus said shaking the man's arm warmly. "Did you get any word from Rhea or Thithis?"

He nodded, beaming at Xena. "They've promised to join us. All we need to do is send them the signal and they'll send in reinforcements. They're in the same situation as us and can't spare much, but they'll help." Xena smiled at the good news and continued to study the map. "We'll be married before you know it, Xena," he finished softly.

Xena glanced at him nervously and returned her attention to the map. "Let's deal with one thing at a time Maphias," she said quietly.

Two more people entered the now closed tavern, this time from the back store rooms. Cyrene and Toris were discussing dwindling supplies when they stopped abruptly.

"I got it, Toris," Lyceus blurted happily. "I know you said it couldn't be done but I've got the map of Cortese's campaign. He's headed for Amphipolis, just like Xena said. Maphias talked to the Elders at Rhea and Thithis they're going to join us..."

"This is madness," Toris sputtered, furious. "I don't care what Rhea or Thithis told you, they're worse off than us. They don't have anyone to send."

"They have people our age," Xena countered.

"Which is too young to be fighting warlords," Toris insisted.

"Toris is right," Cyrene agreed. "Xena, I don't have to explain why I don't want you to fight. You know the reasons."

"But mother," Lyceus pleaded. "Xena is a natural. She can think on her feet better than any of us. Even if she doesn't touch a sword, we still need her to assess the situation when the fighting starts. Amphipolis doesn't deserve to be ground under Cortese's boot heel because of an Amazon Prophecy..."

"Lyceus, that's enough!" Cyrene said sharply. "Toris and some of the others who don't want to throw their lives away have moved supplies into the hills. I don't want to lose any of my children in a futile battle. If Cortese's army comes through Amphipolis, please promise me you'll go to safety." Neither Lyceus nor Xena spoke. Maphias kept quiet as well although it was clear his silence was out of nothing more than allegiance to his future wife. "Xena?" Cyrene insisted.

Xena raised her head and looked with sorrow into her mother's eyes. "Mother, some things are worth dying for. Freedom is one of them."

Cyrene blinked back tears. "If you ever have children, Xena, I hope you never have to hear such words fall from their lips."

"Cortese may be a slaver, but that isn't what he wants from Amphipolis," Toris continued glaring at his sister. "He needs us to feed his army. He wants our supplies, not our people."

"Keep telling yourself that, Toris," Lyceus challenged.

The day Cortese invaded was crisp with the first breath of winter. Xena walked purposefully through the streets of her home one more time, checking the young and elderly that were determined to fight. Once the fighting began, it would be hard to move forces from one end of town to the other. Xero followed her younger self silently, Mel Pappas keeping pace at her side.

"You're not going to make me watch the whole battle are you?" Xero asked dryly.

Mel's voice was filled with infinite sadness when she replied, "I'm sorry to say it doesn't last that long." Before she could reply the sounds of shouting had begun. The army of Cortese was at the front gates of Amphipolis.

Xero watched in frustrated silence as the battle commenced. The forces of Amphipolis were seriously

outnumbered as well as out classed. Seasoned forces fought against adolescents and the elderly and the outcome was predictable. Still Xena's forces put up more of a fight than Xero expected and more than once the hacker had the brief hope that the tide of the battle might turn. Then with a grim sense of the present she realized that she was not in a virtual arcade but watching the past, supposedly her past.

"Where is Hades are the forces from Rhea and Thithis?" Lyceus yelled as he and his sister fought back to back at the front of the battle. Wielding swords, they dodged arrows and fought back the first of Cortese's forces that came over the wall. Neither sibling willing to kill, they did their best to disable their opponents, tiring quickly from the added effort.

Something caught Xena's eye and her heart sank. "Over there!" she called to her brother. An archer dressed in the colors of Rhea climbed over the wall, assisted by a man dressed as infantry from Thithis. The reinforcements had arrived, only they were fighting on the wrong side.

"Damn, it!" Lyceus cursed, taking his eyes off the far wall for a fatal moment. Xero and Xena both turned at the distinctive thwap of a bowstring. As if in slow motion both women saw the arrow buzzing straight for Lyceus' chest. Xena screamed. Lyceus turned to look, not realizing the danger until the impact of the arrow made him wince in pain. He stared at his chest in mild surprise as he sank to the ground in Xena's arms, watching his life spill onto the Amphipolitan dirt.

Xero looked around in confusion as the battle continued to rage around her. Cortese's army was making quick work of the resistance. Those who weren't killed were rounded up, the injured members of the conquering army taken to safely beyond the battle.

Xena wept, trying to desperately struggle against the tears she couldn't stop. Not wanting her brother to worry she tried to hide her anguish. "Easy, Ly. You're going to be all right."

"Fraid not, Xe," he croaked, spitting up a little blood, which Xena wiped from his lips. "You fought well, sister. But we didn't kill anybody...guess we don't have this war thing down quite yet."

"You did fine," Xena said choking back a sob. "I'm proud of you, brother. Hang in there..."

"I love you too, Xena," he said, his eyes fluttering closed.

"I love you," Xena whispered fiercely. Her brother's lips broke into a grin and he was still. Xero watched the scene dumbfounded, as paralyzed as Xena.

"Come on," Mel urged, from next to Xero.

"What happens to her now?" Xero asked, strangely moved by the heartbreak she'd just witnessed.

Mel wiped a tear from each eye, also moved by the scene and looked sadly at her companion. "The rest of her life."

The two women backed away just as members of Cortese's army came upon the scene. Lyceus was dragged from Xena's arms and tossed aside as her limbs were tied behind her back.

"If only she'd been able to catch that arrow," Xero whispered as the scene slowly faded.

"That's just what Xena said," Mel agreed.

I've been pushed, I've been pulled, I've been put out and trod on

— Ann Wilson

Chapter 2: Learning the Software

"Hey, Xero. Wake up," The hand shaking her shoulder was not a gentle one. Xero blinked once and gazed, perplexed for a moment into the face of the waitress, Ska Mayhem.

"What is it?" she croaked and looked down at the body curled up at her side. Rielle slept soundly, one arm wrapped around Xero's waist, head nestled against the hacker's breast, drooling a little on the biker jacket. Xero smiled--the jacket was no big deal.

"Your girlfriend," Ska replied, breaking into the hacker's thoughts. "You left her tag numbers with Addict. Sure enough someone's tapped into Archive nodes and is asking about the car. She's being tracked."

"Right." Xero nodded and the waitress left them alone. Without disturbing the red head at her side, Xero fished into a jacket pocket and pulled out a couple of pills. Alcohol Dehydrogenase,

cheap and reliable, would neutralize any drink remaining in her system. She downed them with the last of her beer and woke her companion.

“Rielle, wake up.” Without moving her arm wrapped around the syscop’s shoulders, she brought her other hand to the young woman’s face and gently brushed away some stray strands of hair.

“You’ve got a gentle touch for a thug,” Rielle commented as she blinked her eyes open.

“I make my living with my hands,” Xero replied defensively.

“Yeah, right.” Rielle withdrew her arm from around the hacker’s waist and sat up. “So what’s going on?” she asked.

“Looks like you’re coming with me,” Xero announced, sounding none too happy about it. “Unless you want your wife to find you here. She’s put out a search on your car. Calling your buddies at Archive, I think.”

“Shit,” Rielle replied. “Paula’s got a nasty temper. Where are you going? You can’t go back to your place, and we can’t go to mine.”

Xero eased out of the booth and stretched, her t-shirt riding up to reveal a muscled abdomen. “I’ve got stuff to do. I want to get to the bottom of this so I’m going to a place where I can, up in North California. You can come with, if you want.”

Rielle shrugged indifferently even though she had no intention of letting the hacker out of her sight. “Might as well, I’m still on vacation.”

The two made their way to the bar, stepping over unconscious bodies littered about the floor and slumped over in seats. Rielle was surprised to see several men still in the bar. Three men were tied up in a corner dressed only in their underwear, unconscious. After a second look, Rielle realized that one of them worked in her department at Archive. “Careless syscops?” she inquired dryly.

Xero nodded. “Yeah, we can spot ‘em before they even get in the front door. Bandit tags ‘em as they step through. We find out what they want, and if they’re here for arrests we drug ‘em and they wake up naked in West Hollywood.”

“That sounds dangerous,” Rielle replied.

“I’ve never seen a syscop back after that,” Xero agreed.

“You do the same thing to female syscops?” she asked.

“No,” Xero shot back with a grin. “The women are fun to corrupt.” Rielle knew she wasn’t joking and decided to let the issue drop. “Any news?” the hacker inquired of the woman behind the bar who was trying to maneuver around the large iguana to put shot glasses on a tray. The lizard kept flicking his tail, knocking glasses onto the floor where they spilled what remained of their contents before rolling under tables.

“Phopas and I.Q. had net duty. So far we’ve heard that three more members of Congress have been unsubbed and we know for a fact that eight hackers were done in as well. That part naturally hasn’t hit the news nets.”

Argo knocked over a couple more glasses when Ska approached. “No, Tess. You’ve got to move the blasted lizard, you can’t work around him.”

Tess frowned at the other waitress. “Argo belonged to Bat, therefore I assumed he bites.”

“Don’t be silly,” Ska admonished, “Bat couldn’t possibly train her iguana to...ow!” she yelped. With a groan, she pried the lizard’s mouth open and extracted her finger which now sported a bright red welt.

“Here, let me help,” Wordee urged, approaching the other two. Glad to be rid of the foul tempered reptile, Ska passed Argo to Wordee. “You’ve got to know their special spot... watch.” Then, cradling the large iguana like a baby, the hacker gently rubbed soothing circles on the reptile’s abdomen. Argo struggled at first then was absolutely still.

“What’d ya do?” Ska asked, amazed. “Is it dead?”

“No, I just put him to sleep. Bat showed me how. Just rub their bellies and lizards go out like a light.”

“One of my old boyfriends was the same way,” Lani remarked.

“Like she can remember back that far, dating men,” Ska shot back rolling her eyes. “So what are you going to do with Argo now?”

“Look,” Xero offered, “we’ll take Argo with us.” She picked up the sleeping iguana and put it on her shoulder. The large lizard woke up and tried to bite her ear but ended up chewing on the collar of her biker jacket instead. “I just need the bike.”

Ska nodded and pushed it out from behind the bar. Rielle held the front door open as the two women maneuvered the large motorcycle onto the street out front. “I’ll be in touch,” she said as the waitress closed the Saddlehorn Pub & Grill’s front door.

“You know how to ride one of these?” Rielle inquired dubiously as she accepted the helmet that Xero offered her.

Xero frowned depositing Argo into his carrying compartment before donning her own helmet. “Yes, I know how to ride one of these.” Gracefully, she threw her leg over the seat and positioned herself. Somewhat hesitantly, Rielle mounted the bike behind her. “You can hold here, here, or here.”

Rielle heard Xero’s voice through the speaker in her helmet as she pointed to a hand grip at the bottom of Rielle’s seat, hand grips to the side of Rielle’s seat and her own waist. Without hesitation the syscop wrapped her arms around the hacker’s waist, banging her helmet into the helmet in front of her as she moved forward. “And don’t knock heads,” Xero growled.

“No head-knocking,” Rielle repeated shifting her position slightly. “Got it.”

Xero checked her watch before revving up the bike’s engine--3:00am. “We’ve got plenty of dark left to get most of the way there. We won’t have to ride much in full sunlight.”

“Just where is it we’re going?” Rielle asked, speaking normally into the helmet microphone.

“Like I said,” the hacker replied as she punched information into the GPS unit mounted onto the motorcycle’s instrumentation panel. “North California. We’re going to pay a visit to Bat’s ex-husband. Hopefully he’s still got the equipment they used when they were in the business.”

“She worked for Ronin, right?” Rielle asked as the bike’s engine growled to life and they made their way towards the Pacific Coast Highway.

“Yeah,” Xero agreed, “They were both systems managers for Ronin. Henry quit before Bat did. Corporate thugs never went after him because he went strictly low tech. Started farming vegetables and studying low tech medicine, shit like that.”

“Bat didn’t quit at the same time?”

“No. Henry dumped her. Broke their marriage contract and ate the penalties because he’d had enough. Bat decided she’d had enough too, moved down to South California, and started hacking. The goons were onto her in no time. That was when I met her and she started working for me.”

“Sixty-eight jobs in five years is a heavy work load.” Rielle commented, remembering the hostile looks the other hackers had given her.

“I suppose,” Xero admitted. “Bat didn’t have to work for me though; she could have quit and found work with anyone.”

“So why did she work for you?” Rielle pressed.

“Because I’m better than anyone else,” the hacker stated simply.

“For the sake of us all, I hope to gods your right,” Rielle murmured into her back.

Rielle thoroughly enjoyed the drive up the coast. While the hacker was not the most fluent conversationalist, she wasn’t mute either. Before long they both discovered they shared a love of old movies. She considered asking the hacker about the groupie who had left the bar in tears, then thought better of it. Now that Xero was finally behaving like a decent human being she didn’t want to spoil it with questions she knew would only incite the woman.

“Did you know *Scrooged* was based on a novel by Charles Dickens?” Xero asked breaking into Rielle’s thoughts. “*A Christmas Carol*.”

The syscop smiled. “As a matter of fact I did know that. But only because I did a paper on all the adaptations of that story in college--87 different ones, in fact. I’m surprised you know it though. Most people don’t.”

Xero just shrugged, smiling to herself.

They rode in silence for a time. Once through the Gaviota Pass, Xero pulled off to the side of the road.

“Is there a problem?” Rielle asked.

Xero shook her helmeted head. “No, I just wanted to stretch my legs and check the GPS unit. You hungry?” Rielle watched as the hacker took off her heavy leather jacket and prepared to stuff it into the saddle bag with the rest of her gear, extracting a nutrient bar and handing it to the syscop.

She accepted the snack and looked longingly at the jacket. “Mind if I wear it?” Rielle asked. “It’d be warmer than my jacket and I’m still kinda cold.”

Xero looked up in surprise. “If you were cold then why didn’t you say so?” Rielle shrugged. She didn’t have an answer she was willing to share. Xero waited while the syscop slipped out of her thin jacket then helped her into the one she’d just removed. It was too big for her but still carried the warmth of the hacker’s body and scent of her skin.

Rielle sighed in contentment. “How much further?” she asked.

Standing next to the bike, Xero pointed to the monitor just above the iguana carrier. “We’re here,” she said pointing to the pass. “We’re going up here into the Vetana wilderness in North California. Bat and Henry had a house there. I’m sure he stayed put. It was a nice chunk of dirt.” Xero lifted her eyes to the horizon and looked critically at the diminishing darkness. “Sun’s about to come up, but we’ve still got some darkness and pre-dawn.”

The hacker hadn’t lied. As she guessed, they reached the middle of the Big Sur coast by 9:00am. Rielle fully enjoyed the ride. Pressed against the hacker’s body wrapped in her jacket she simply held on and enjoyed the sunrise. They’d shared a laugh as they passed the state line at Ragged Point. *Leaving South California: The Happiest State On Earth* had been crossed out and *Armageddon Country: Fires, Riots, Mudslides & Earthquakes* had been spray painted in its place. It was no secret that the Disney owned and ran South California the same way Ronin ran the northern neighbor.

When the state split in two, a media battle had been waged between Disney and Newhall Land & Farming over the location of the new state capital. The Mouse had proved mightier than the tractor and Burbank was named the capital over Valencia. That mission accomplished, South California quickly became the most media savvy state in the union-- even if their public transportation system sucked.

In North California, the Ronin Corporation kept a much lower profile. Specializing in computer technologies for government and domestic uses, the company relied less on individual dollars to fuel its franchise. Truth be told, they weren’t nearly as powerful as Disney... yet. While the two states still battled bitterly over the rebuilt Los Angeles Aqueduct and water rights, South California was still the big bully in the west.

Once past the John Little Reserve, Xero left Highway One and headed onto several smaller roads. Taking direction solely from the GPS unit, she followed the instructions beamed by satellite until she found the residence she sought.

The house was a two story structure deep in what was left of the Los Padres National Forest. A simple dwelling perched on a cliff overlooking the ocean in front, surrounded by redwood trees in the back.

Xero waited for Rielle to get off the bike then followed suit. She shuddered visibly and Rielle wondered if it was because she was cold. Moments later she suspected it was because the hacker found the out of doors disconcerting. Rielle wondered at how little time the hacker must have spent out of the city as a youth. After checking the front entrance and walking slowly around the house, Xero walked up with a grin on her face. “We’re in luck. Henry isn’t home. Probably in Carmel or somewhere getting supplies.”

“Why is that good news?” Rielle asked.

“Because I don’t want him to know we’re here. I’ll hide the bike in the trees. We’ll sneak into the downstairs workroom. Bat said he lives upstairs, never goes down there. If we’re quiet, we can do our thing and get out before he knows.” Xero continued to look around nervously as she talked.

It was clear she wanted to get indoors as quickly as possible.

The two women walked behind the building and Rielle let out a surprised gasp. “Gods, it’s beautiful.”

“What?” Xero asked looking around the clearing. “It’s just a pond.”

The hacker referred to the large body of water back behind the house. A man made lake of sorts, it was half again the size of a large swimming pool, ringed with large boulders. Several species of fish could be seen darting beneath crystal clear waters. A short distance from the pond was a large garden, a variety of vegetables growing in the nearly coastal climate.

“The pond, the garden, everything,” Rielle beamed, looking around.

“Whatever,” Xero grumbled and headed for the nearest window. She pulled a tiny flashlight from her pocket and using the thin beam explored the structure’s interior. She examined the window several times, at first seeming frustrated then finally laughing out loud. “The bastard doesn’t even *have* an alarm system,” she announced, taking the knife from her boot. She selected a spot a couple of inches below the windowsill and jabbed her knife point into the molding. The window smoothly slid open.

“Impressive,” Rielle observed, watching the hacker gracefully ease her body through the opening.

“See if you can cover up our tracks, and those of the bike,” Xero asked from inside the house. “I’ll open the back door.”

When Rielle got inside the house, she took a few moments to let her eyes adjust to the darkness. Shielded by the mountains, the early rays of sunlight wouldn’t hit the east windows for some time. Looking around, it was clear that the downstairs portion of the house was indeed uninhabited. Thin mylar sheets covered most of the furniture. There was a bedroom, a bathroom, a small library and a large workroom. It took a few seconds for Rielle to spot Xero in the workroom. She was on her back, her legs sticking out from underneath a computer console like a mechanic working on a truck.

“Do you want some light?” Rielle asked as she deposited Argo onto a table and moved to where her companion was working. “The controls are over here.”

“No, I don’t want to risk Henry seeing it if he gets back soon.”

“I take it he doesn’t like you?”

Xero paused in her work, considering her response. “Like Ska said, spouses hate me. Get down here and hold the flashlight for me, will ya?”

Rielle complied and in moments was on her back next to the hacker, holding a small flashlight while Xero checked, and adjusted a series of wires emerging from the bottom of the unit.

“I’ve only met Henry twice. The first time he threatened to turn me in, and the second time he threatened to kill me.”

“Well you certainly make an impression on people,” Rielle remarked, keeping the light steady. She could feel Xero shrug her shoulders.

“I didn’t force Bat into anything she wasn’t up for. Henry came down south when he first heard Bat started hacking, although she wasn’t ‘Bat’ then. No way was she going back with him at that point. She was finally doing something interesting. The second time he came by was after her accident, when she lost her eye. I think he was more pissed at the mechanical implant than the fact that she’d lost an eye hacking.

“There, that should do it,” Xero said as she let go of the last wire. Standing back up she looked around the room. Deciding on a location, she moved the large monitor behind a book case, shielding it from the windows.

“It’s quite a system,” Rielle said as she emerged from beneath the unit, surveying the banks of hardware filling the immediate area.

“It’s older stuff but still with a lot of guts. When Henry and Bat worked for Ronin, they managed the systems from this very room. With the tweaking I just did, I’d put this system up against anyone’s.”

“But what about closed loop safeties?” Rielle asked as the familiar tone of spinning drives

added itself to the ambient noise of the room. “You’re not going to try to get this thing on the nets are you? You’re dead, remember?”

“I’m just going to engage the start up routines, do some diagnostics. I’ll be fine. Head upstairs and see if you can dig up something to eat. If you hear Henry drive up, just come back down here.”

A little annoyed that she’d just been dismissed, Rielle frowned at the hacker. “Aren’t you worried he’ll suspect something?”

“He’ll go up the front stairs and enter the house that way. Besides, he won’t come down here--Bat told me that he hates being around computers since he quit, but they’re worth too much to destroy. Come on, I’m hungry. Get me something to eat. Please.”

“Well, if you put it like that,” Rielle allowed as she headed for the stairs.

“Women,” Xero muttered with a chuckle. Positioning herself on the floor, sitting cross legged, the hacker positioned the input board across her lap. She had easy access to the keyboard where chords of keyed commands would send hundreds of commands through the computer system. The tracksystem at her left guided her through streams of data and icons that began to clutter the screen.

In no time she had familiarized herself with the system, taking note of the software, how it was organized and which protocols were used. Satisfied with the diagnostic results, she settled in and decided to do some work. Taking a generic system identity, she added the command codes needed to get where she needed to go, then opened the channels that would fling her creation onto the nets. Keeping a low profile, she guided her icon through a series of safe channels, absorbing information and keeping track of how quickly that information was processed.

Before long a smirk eased across the hacker’s face. Like moving from a hang glider to a jet, the Ronin computer followed her commands with blazing speed. With the ability to track a number of channels at once, Xero was filled with the confidence to move closer to home. If answers were to be found on the nets, she’d need to hack into her own files to get them.

Rielle moved quietly from the stairwell to the den. The air carried the faint fragrance of incense and herbs. Instantly she felt enveloped by a comforting warmth. The decor of the house upstairs was markedly different from the shrouded environment downstairs. Most striking was the abundance of wood and other natural fibers that were everywhere. The throw rug looked like wool, or a similar hand spun yarn. The couch was leather, with several hand woven and embroidered pillows. Everything screamed low tech. It took Rielle only a moment to realize that not a single piece of high tech equipment could be spotted anywhere. No comm units or old fashioned phones, no monitors or computer equipment could be seen anywhere in what was clearly the living room. There were plenty of bound books though, as well as potted plants and a variety of sculptures. Most impressive was a near life sized figure near the couch made of wood with a series of black dots burned into it’s surface. Rielle wondered what it could possibly represent as she made her way to the kitchen.

Like the rest of the upstairs living space, the kitchen was low tech. An old fashioned electric stove and oven immediately caught the syscop’s attention. While Rielle prided herself on her talent for food preparation, it was clear that the owner of this kitchen was a master. Pots and pans hung on a copper rack above the stove, dust free from frequent use. The tile counters held a variety of glass bottles and containers filled with different plants and liquids.

Grabbing a couple of drinking glasses from a cupboard, Rielle filled one with water from the tap. After taking an experimental sniff, she tasted it and smiled. The water was clean, wonderfully clean. She filled the other glass, then proceeded to the refrigerator.

Xero shifted position to relieve the tension that was building in her neck. Already she’d utilized an impressive number of files from her own vaults and had nearly finished in establishing independent net accounts. All that remained was copying over the necessary pass codes to give her full access. Already she’d ducked out of sight before several net cops and one or two colleagues had

the opportunity to spot her.

Carefully moving around the program triggers she'd constructed, Xero entered the core of her data files. Everything seemed as it should, when the lines of data streaming across the screen suddenly blurred. Xero blinked. It didn't help. An odd sense of vertigo hit as her mind filled with images.

A man stood before her dressed in black. His head was shaved, and displayed an ornate tattoo. His black jackboots and mirrored sunglasses completed the skinhead image. He also wore the most bizarre beard the hacker had ever seen. He was hideous. "Hello Xena," he announced with a wide grin.

Xero realized she was still sitting on the floor, though the floor of what she could no longer discern. She decided to stand. "Look, you've got the wrong—"

Her words were cut off as the man spun, the heel of his boot connecting squarely with her face. The impact of the kick sent her flying and she landed in a heap, blood flowing freely from her nose and lip. "You'll get up when I tell you to get up, Xena," he growled.

Had that been the first time Xero had ever been kicked in the face she may have been paralyzed with fear and shock. But it wasn't and it only served to make her mad. Letting blood pool into her cupped hand she threw it at the skinhead when he moved close. The fact that he didn't flinch startled Xero. For decades, the sight of blood—the threat of lethal contamination—got a person's attention like nothing else.

"You're hardly a golden hind, Xena--you think your blood scares me?" he said as he twisted for another kick.

Xero was ready this time and caught his booted foot as it sped for her head. With a twist that should have dislocated his ankle, he only continued the spin and hit her in the side of the head with his other boot.

"Who the fuck are you?" Xero asked as she tried to stand.

"Something wrong with your memory, Xena?" he asked, circling. "You don't remember your old buddy Ares? You don't seem to stay dead very well. Who was that bitch pretending to be you?"

With eyes blazing in fury, Xero struck out with a blow that should have connected solidly with her attacker's throat, possibly collapsing the trachea. As it was he caught her fist and dislocated her shoulder as he spun her away. As her torn muscles screamed in protest, Xero tucked her limp hand into the waistband of her jeans to keep the limb from swinging. At the moment it was useless for anything else.

"This is too fucking easy, Xena," Ares taunted as he drew his sword and made a few experimental swings with it around his body.

Deciding that escape might be her only chance for survival, Xero looked around. The workroom at Henry's house was gone. Instead, she was standing on an endless plain of whiteness. There was no horizon, no sun. Only the slightly green glow of artificial lighting and even then no light source was evident. Xero had no idea where she was. Just then Ares lunged with an arcing strike. Dodging on instinct alone, Xero missed most of the blow, the blade only landing a grazing swipe across her back.

"Come on, Xena," Ares demanded. "You were supposed to be unbeatable when in your own body. I made it clear the last time we met that I'd kill you. Don't tell me I've waited all this time for *this*! Gabrielle would be more of a challenge at this point."

"I'm trying to tell you," Xero panted after dodging another blow, "I'm not Xena."

It was hard for Xero not to slip. Blood was beginning to pool on the floor at her feet, flowing freely from her face as well as wounds on her back, arms and legs. Each glancing blow with the sword left a mark of some sort, some deeper than others, but so far she'd not lost any limbs.

"Oh no?" Ares asked amused. "Then explain this." He shifted so Xero could see him from the side. It was unmistakable. His black pants strained under the bulge of his erection. "Happens every time we're together, Xena," he explained. "But you've had this effect on men for some time. Since Cortese if I'm not mistaken. Care to take care of me the way you took care of him?" Ares asked with a laugh.

Getting an idea, Xero lunged and hit the floor in a tight roll. She rose to her knees right in front of Ares and landed a powerful punch with both fists on the bulge at his crotch. With a howl of rage, the fist that held his sword connected solidly with her jaw, shattering the bone and sending her skidding across the floor.

With hatred in his eyes Ares raised his sword above his head with both hands and threw down a crushing blow just as Xero's body vanished.

"NO!!!!!!!" he screamed in frustration as his sword imbedded itself into the gleaming, white, non-existent floor.

Rielle frowned into the 'fridge. It was hard to tell what any of the food stuffs were. There wasn't a packaged meal in sight. Her attention was diverted when an odd feeling of danger took hold. She listened carefully, things were silent, no sound of approaching cars. With a start she realized that the sound she was missing was the faint clicking of someone working on a computer. Things were too quiet downstairs. Hurrying, she headed back and froze at the sight of the hacker, convulsing on the floor in front of the monitor. Blood ran freely from her nose and mouth, and she shook violently.

"Shit!" Rielle gasped and hurried to Xero's side, careful to no more than glance at the screen which swirled with indecipherable patterns. "Xero, snap out of it!" She yelled and tried shaking the hacker, her fingers burning from the contact with overheated skin. When the power switch to the monitor failed and pulling the power cord only activated internal batteries, she ran back upstairs taking the steps two at a time until she was in Henry's living room once more. Grabbing the nearest artifact that could be used as a club, she headed downstairs and beat the living shit out of the four million dollar computer.

Xero's convulsions stilled when the motherboard and redundant back up systems were pounded to fragments of plastic and metal. With a groan the hacker's eyes fluttered closed. Panic surged through Rielle's small frame as the color drained from her companions' face. She searched frantically for a pulse and after several attempts found a weak one.

"Stay with me, Xero," she demanded as she poured cold water over the hacker's face and head. "You're not fucking running away from this. I need you, God damnit." Xero didn't respond which added to the syscop's anxiety. "Who told you to go on the fucking nets anyway?" Rielle shouted as she loosened the hacker's clothing. "You were just supposed to see if the system was online. Run a diagnostic. Damnnit, Xero, your friends are dropping like flies but you...!"

"What's going on down here?" a male voice demanded, silencing Rielle's ranting.

"She's been hurt, I need help. Call a medic," Rielle shot back, taking a wallet from her back pocket and flashing her badge. "I'm a System Officer with Archive Corporation Get her some help." Rielle spared the man only the briefest glance. He was Xero's height, with short dirty blond hair and the muscular build of a swimmer. His eyes were blue, almost as vibrant as the hacker's, and his clean shaven face was uncommonly tan.

He hurried to Xero's side, a frown creasing his features when he instantly recognized the face. "Breaking and entering isn't common practice for a syscop," he commented as he checked Xero's pulse.

"It's a long story I'd be happy to bore you with when she's out of danger," Rielle replied, forcing a professional calm she didn't feel.

"Xero tire of Renée already? You her fresh meat?"

Instantly, Rielle's face changed. No longer panicked or worried, cold fury settled on her features. "Renée Palmer is dead. That's why Xero and I are here, you moron. If you can help her," she said evenly, "then help her. If not, call for someone who can or so help me I'll rip your balls off and give them to you as earrings."

"Charming image," the man shot back. He seemed undecided for only an instant before sliding his hands under the hacker's shoulders. "Help me get her to the pond outside."

"Do you know what you're doing?" Rielle asked as she hoisted Xero's legs.

"As a matter of fact, I do," he replied calmly, setting Xero's body down at the edge of the

pond. He eased his body in and motioned for Rielle to shove the hacker's body into the water with him. "Whoever tried to zap her was doing a damn good job of it. You're lucky you broke the connection when you did."

Rielle joined him in the pond as they moved to deeper water. Tendrils of stem rose from the water's surface, a testament to the hacker's elevated skin temperature. Henry checked her pulse once more, then pressed two fingers along several points on her arms and legs.

He shook his head sadly. "She's really messed up. I'll need to go back to the house and get some stuff together to help her." He fished in his pocket and extracted a pocket knife. "Stay with her, see if you can get her clothes off. Keep as much of her submerged as you can for the next half hour."

"Can't we get her to a doctor?" Rielle asked hopefully, accepting the knife.

"This isn't South California. Hackers don't own doctors up here. You take her into a clinic with these symptoms and they'd be happy to see her go on principal alone. Besides, I think the move would do her in. I'm sorry, but I'm it."

Rielle wasn't sure why, but she trusted this man. There was something about him that assured her that he would do everything in his power to keep Xero alive, in spite of the fact that he hated her. When he climbed out of the pool, she returned her attention to her friend and began cutting the clothes from the hacker's submerged body as gently as she could.

"Is she dead?" a nervous voice inquired.

Janice looked over her shoulder and grinned back at Mel. "I don't think so. I think if she were dead, we'd know about it." Xero groaned and tried to open her eyes, but they weren't cooperating. Janice put a restraining hand on her shoulder and kept her still. "Easy hacker," Janice admonished. "You just played Russian Roulette and lost."

"What?" Xero croaked, finding the simple task of talking to be supremely difficult.

"You got your clock cleaned by Ares," Janice explained. "Fortunately, that friend of yours came in and saved you before you managed to throw everything away."

"That's enough, Janice," Mel warned. "She isn't in any shape for this. Just let her rest."

Xero's eyes fluttered open as she watched Janice stand and walk back to her companion. Framed by the blue cloudless sky, she decided that although an unusual couple, they were indeed suited to each other.

"Mel, honey. I'd like nothing better than to let her rest. I know she isn't up for this, but what are we gonna do? We can't take on Ares for her. And she can't take him on with any prayer of winning until she knows who she is—"

"I'm fine," Xero cut in, forcing herself to sit up. Once in a vertical position, she promptly leaned over and retched.

"Forgive me for saying so," Mel gently noted, "but you don't look fine."

"Do you know what happened?" the hacker asked weakly.

"You did something that put you in the same realm as Ares. Once he spotted you, he didn't waste any time in acting on it," Janice supplied, returning to Xero and kneeling down to look the hacker in the eye.

"Okay," Xero agreed her head spinning. "I logged onto the nets and something happened. I fought with this weird skinhead—I guess that was Ares—and now I take it I'm not doing so well," she searched for the right word, "over there."

"If you mean 'awake,'" Janice replied, "no, you're not doing so good. You've got a nasty fever and that guy who's helping your friend has been muttering about organs shutting down."

Xero closed her eyes, marveling at the lucidity of her hallucinations. It was easy to see why she'd avoided dreaming all those years. Dreams were a nuisance. "So until I wake up," she ventured, opening her eyes once more, "we just sit here and wait?"

Mel and Janice exchanged glances at the comment. Mel diverted her gaze first, relenting to Janice's will and trusting her companion's judgment.

"Not exactly," the archeologist explained. "We've still got work to do. If you're up for it, of course."

Xero snorted. "I can take whatever this Warrior Princess of yours can dish out," she said with a smirk. While it made her point, the bravado was costly and she needed the support of Janice and Mel in order to stand. Together, the three women walked through the gate of Amphipolis to the command compound of Cortese.

Mel held the tent flap open as Xero and Janice preceded her into the tent. The hacker leaned heavily on the archeologist, having some difficulty moving. It took some managing but both women maneuvered Xero to a table that she could lean on for support. Cortese sat in an ornate high-backed chair at one end of the tent. Resplendent in blue robes he looked like a warlord who very much wanted to be a prince or king. There was a commotion outside and several people were brought into the tent, flanked by well armed guards.

"Is this all that's left of the Amphipolitan army that would defy me?" Cortese asked, his voice lofty and light. Xero hated him on sight.

"They were running things, your lordship. The others have been rounded up and put in the pens." The guard bowed low when he finished his explanation; Xero rolled her eyes.

"So who among you seven is in charge?" Cortese asked looking over the assembled captives. When no one spoke up, Cortese nodded to a guard. "Termin, kill the one on the end."

Before the guard could move, a lone figure rose gracefully to her feet. "No need for that, Cortese--I'm in charge."

The warlord chuckled. "Nice try, my dear, but I'm in no mood for games." With a nod from Cortese, Termin slit the throat of the villager, shoving the body forward where it landed at Xena's feet.

"Hector," Xena whispered, fighting back tears. With a coldness that impressed Xero, but made Janice and Mel flinch, Xena faced Cortese once more. "My name is Xena. My brother Lyceus and I planned the resistance. We traded for a map of the coastal corridor, and have been watching your movements the last two months. Every village along the coast that you've hit you've handled in the same way. Archers, then brute force at the front gate, followed by men on horseback from behind. If we'd gotten the support promised us from Rhea and Thithis, you would not have been successful this time."

"I see," Cortese allowed. "Perhaps poor Hector died in vain. You do sound like you know what you're talking about. Unfortunately for you that Rhea and Thithis couldn't sell out Amphipolis fast enough. But you should have known better. Rhea and Thithis aren't known for their charitable contributions. Lucky me, you didn't have a persuasive diplomat on your hands. Lucky you, you're in charge. I have better uses for women than prolonged public executions."

"It wasn't her, it was me," Maphias said as he tried to rise to his feet. He was shoved down by a guard.

"You?" Cortese mocked. "I'm less likely to believe it was you than her. It takes a woman standing up for you to find your voice? You're pathetic." As he spoke, Cortese never took his eyes off of Xena. He watched her watching him, brave and defiant. As far as he was concerned, they were the only two people there. Stroking his beard thoughtfully, he came to a decision.

"I have a choice for you, Xena," he purred, shifting slightly in his chair. "I'll give you the opportunity to convince me to spare your life."

"Or?" Xena asked when a second choice wasn't voiced.

"Or nothing. You may pleasure me, Xena." He laughed. "If you do a good enough job, maybe you'll live." Maphias struggled against the guard restraining him. "Do I sense some sweetheart jealousy here?" Cortese asked looking at the young man. "Tell me, is she any good?"

"You might as well kill me now, Cortese," Xena said calmly. "Because I'm not doing that."

With an absent hand rubbing up and down his thigh, the warlord smiled at Xena's defiance. It wasn't too hard to guess her age, fifteen maybe. Skilled as a warrior but painfully innocent in other respects. A feral grin spread across his face. He was going to enjoy educating her.

"First thing you need to learn about losing battles, young Xena," he said smoothly. "Is that you tend to have rather limited choices afterwards." After a nod, Termin moved to kill another villager.

"No!" Xena sobbed as another body was thrown at her feet. Next the guard moved to stand next to Maphias.

"Now, let's try this again," Cortese went on smoothly. "I've got all day you know, and if you run out of bodies in here to slaughter, then we've got slave pens full of your neighbors as well as those we've been collecting on our way down the coast. Please, Xena take your time. Wouldn't want you to rush into anything now..."

"I'll do it," Xena whispered, defeated. "Just don't hurt anyone else."

Cortese laughed out loud. "Mistake number two. You're not in a position to make demands of any sort. But since you're willing to be a sport, we'll let your boyfriend live a little longer." He made a hand gesture and all the prisoners save Maphias were escorted from the tent. In moments, the ten guards returned to join the other four,

watching Xena and Cortese with interest.

"Don't worry about them," the warlord urged as he undid the sash on his robe. "You'll be getting rather acquainted with them next." A guard moved behind and Xena was shoved to her knees.

"Bite him!" Xero urged leaping up from the table. Instantly unsteady on her feet she fell to the dirt floor of the tent along side Xena. She tried punching Cortese but growled in frustration as her hands passed through him.

"Untie her," Cortese ordered. "Don't get any bright ideas, my dear. You hurt me and you'll be guest of honor at the execution of each and every Amphipolitan in my slave pens."

"Come on Covington, do something," Xero demanded as Termin cut the ropes that bound her hands.

"The hacker knows my name, I'm flattered," Janice said as she moved to Xero's side. "I'm sorry, Xero but this has already happened. Nothing's going to change. You have to remember it, that's all."

"No!" Xero growled back, "this did not happen to me." Two strong hands were placed on Xero's shoulders and she realized that Mel Pappas had moved to stand behind her.

"It's going to be okay, Xero," she quietly urged. "A lot of things made Xena who she was, most of them unpleasant."

"I don't have a problem with her giving a blow job to some faggot in a bathrobe," she spat defensively.

"Of course you don't," Janice sarcastically agreed. "I'm sure you'll find the crucifixion a piece of cake, too."

"Don't be stupid," Cortese warned a final time as he finished undoing the trousers under his robe. "Get to it, Xena," he said with a grin. "Open wide." Cortese smiled, shoving his hips forward as she opened her mouth.

Face to face with a foul smelling erection, Xena of Amphipolis did as she was told. She refused to close her eyes, and with each thrust of his erect member into her mouth, her eyes got a little

colder and a little more distant. Cortese could have cared less. He didn't realize he was being watched, studied. From his point of view, a young girl who seemed timid and frightened of the task at hand warmed to it with surprising speed. In moment,s he was groaning with delight, taken to surprising heights by his prisoner.

Xero watched in silence. Xena was learning a lesson that the hacker had learned a long time ago. Sex was a weapon. The hacker only hoped that Xena would learn to wield it.

"Like you?" Janice asked softly, cutting into her thoughts.

"More responsibly, perhaps," the hacker replied quietly. Her thoughts drifted back to her most recent encounter in the bathroom at the pub. As the warlord got off, she couldn't help but see herself, sitting on the sink in the bathroom, doing a naive groupie.

"It's not quite the same," Mel supplied gently. "You used her, but you didn't threaten her."

"Yeab," the hacker spat, "I'm a real hero." Her attention was brought back to the tent as Cortese groaned loudly, grabbing Xena's head and thrusting his hips forward powerfully.

"Amazing," he breathed as he pulled his now flaccid member from Xena's lips. She didn't say a word but continued to stare at the warlord. "Termin, take her to the pen with the others. You'll get your turns later. For now, I'd like to see if her boyfriend can top that." Cortese didn't take his eyes from Xena as she stood which was ultimately a mistake. Before the guard could grab her, she spat, splattering his face with sticky ejaculate.

Cortese roared in fury, hitting Xena with a solid backhand. "Get her out of here," he screamed. "Fuck her to death for all I care, just get her out!" With a rough jerk, Termin pulled Xena from the tent. "Now, Maphias, old boy," he continued in a calmer voice as he wiped his face on his sleeve, touching himself. "Where were we?"

Xero followed as Xena was hauled from the tent. "Tell you what," Termin suggested, "you do me first and I'll have the boys go easy on you."

"Why not?" Xena said with an indifferent shrug. As soon as he loosened his grip, however, her hand was at the dagger at his belt. With a quick spin, she turned him around and drew the dagger across his throat. His screams nothing more than air making bubbles in the blood, Termin slumped over, his life gushing down his body and covering the hands of his killer. Xena's body shook with revulsion as she lowered the still mass to the ground. Unable to stop herself, she retched, adding vomit to the blood on Termin's clothes. Quickly shaking it off, she dragged the inert body to a cluster of trees near the tent. When Xena looked up, Xero started in surprise at a face that now began to resemble her own.

Xena didn't waste any time. Moving quickly and silently she used Termin's dagger to cut the ropes that tethered the horses. She slit the throats of two guards that stood between her and the slave pens. After finding her companions, she roughed out a plan which they spread to the rest of the captives.

Xero watched in amazement as the fifteen year old calmly went about orchestrating the rescue of nearly two hundred people. Like the wind, she couldn't be seen, but the evidence of her passing was everywhere. Horses began to mill about, untethered, but not charging. Saddle straps and bowstrings were cut, the random guard murdered. All told, the young girl from Amphipolis took five lives before finding the body of her murdered brother. Discarded in a pile of the dead, she drug him from view.

With a mighty yell, she charged through the camp as the slaves burst from their pens. Cortese's men were taken completely by surprise as chaos broke out in camp. Charging directly into Cortese's tent, she continued on as it collapsed and several figures were trapped underneath. Had she known which one was Cortese, she'd surely have trampled him but it was impossible to tell. When Maphias finally emerged in the folds of fabric, Xena grabbed him and hoisted him on to her horse. Lyceus' body strapped in front, Maphias in back.

It didn't take long for the sacking of Amphipolis to turn into the rout of Cortese. Joined by slaves from conquered villages, the freed men and women didn't hesitate to brutally attack their captors. Without the dismissed armies of Rhea and Thithis, Cortese's men wasted no time in calling for a retreat.

While the cost had been dear, the warlord had been turned back. By nightfall Xena stood in the square of Amphipolis surrounded by those she'd freed. Void of any sign of nervousness or fear, she spoke clearly, her voice carrying to the back of the throng. Her words were simple. Those that had been captured from neighboring villages were free to go home. Those who wanted to turn to the hills to join their families were free to do that as well. Cortese was gone for now, but unless steps were taken, there was no guarantee he wouldn't be back.

"What steps are those?" one man called out from the front row.

"Amphipolis has a score to settle with Rhea and Thithis. It's going to cost a lot to rebuild our village; they should pay the price," Xena replied with smooth confidence. "I plan to extract payment. For any who wish to join me, we leave at first light. As long as I live, I'll see to it that this never happens to our home and our families again."

Everyone cheered the sentiment although not everyone joined her.

Xero, Janice and Mel watched as Maphias said his good byes sitting astride a war horse with Lyceus' still body strapped to another. "I'm sorry, Xena," he said. "I just can't do this. I just want to put this behind me."

Xena nodded, her expression either indifferent or understanding, Xero couldn't tell which. "It's alright, Maphias," she replied. "I don't think this has turned out the way any of us thought it would. Take Lyceus to mother and tell her..." she paused a moment then sighed sadly. "It doesn't matter what you tell her. My saying I won't make the same mistakes again isn't going to make her feel any better. Tell Toris to take care of mother, I'll come back when I know Amphipolis is safe."

Maphias rode off as Xena turned her back. Janice, Mel and Xero followed as the warrior returned to her army.

It's no secret that a conscience can sometimes be a pest

It's no secret ambition bites the nails of success

Every artist is a cannibal, every poet is a thief

All kill their inspiration, and sing about the grief

— Bono

Chapter 3: Multitasking

Xero's eyes fluttered open and she groaned weakly. Her senses were filled with a pleasant aroma, but every fiber of her being ached. As if her skin had been peeled from her body and sewn back haphazardly, there wasn't a part of her body she didn't want to run and hide from. After some absent consideration, she decided that the pain radiating from the center of her brain surpassed the anguish reported by the rest of her.

"I thought those herbs might wake you," a male voice said quietly at her side. "Welcome back."

"Rielle," Xero croaked, to discover that her mouth was painfully dry. Henry moved into the hacker's field of vision, holding a small ice chip. She opened her mouth and let the water melt on her tongue. She couldn't remember ever tasting anything as sweet.

"Relax, Xero. She's over there," Henry replied, nodding to the space next to her. "But don't

wake her up. She's been up for over fifty hours taking care of you. I only convinced her to get some shut eye when it seemed you were out of the woods."

Xero turned her head, grimacing at the pain and dizziness it induced, to find she was lying on a soft bed, a cushion that had been set up on the floor of the work room. Rielle MacGab lay a couple of feet away on a similar cushion, her head pillowed on crossed arms, sleeping soundly.

Returning her attention to Henry, the hacker accepted another ice chip. "I'm not sure what happened," she admitted.

Henry chuckled quietly. "Let's see, you broke into my house, hacked into a Ronin work station, and got fried on the nets. Rielle said you were convulsing and she couldn't shut the system down. She finally beat it into submission with a rain stick. I got home about then. You were burning up."

"I feel like I've been drawn and quartered," Xero mumbled.

"A fate you most certainly deserve," Henry agreed. Xero glared at him and he shrugged. "I won't lie to you. Your meridians are still a mess and I don't know if you suffered any brain damage or not. I was ready to let you unsub, but your friend is very persuasive."

"Don't tell me she told you her 'past life' theory," the hacker groaned.

"Oh yeah. We've had a couple of days to talk. She spent a lot of time with you out in the pond, trying to get your temperature down. That water is snow runoff so it's pretty cold. I think she needed to talk to take her mind off the fact that her lips were turning blue." He paused for a moment then continued solemnly. "She told me about Renée," he added at last.

Xero closed her eyes briefly forcing the image of Bat's charred corpse from her mind. "I'm sorry about that, Henry," she said simply.

"Not as sorry as I am," he whispered. "I've been using acupuncture to try to straighten out your meridians. Why don't you get some rest and we'll try again later?"

Xero watched him go, wondering why the hell she didn't just thank the man.

The mobil communications unit buzzed loudly waking Jasper Helms from a sound sleep. He groped for the device, tipping over a glass of water on the nightstand in the process. "What is it?" he demanded, picking up the glass.

"Xena may still be alive," Ares' metallic voice growled through the speaker.

Confused, the senator shook his head trying to clear it. "I thought you eliminated the hacker yourself."

"Mistaken identity. Xena entered the net not long ago, but managed to escape. I want your people to find her. She's using the ID Xero. Find her, capture her, and get her on the net."

"Wouldn't it be simpler to just take care of her myself? Jasper asked, uncertain why his sponsor had such a fixation.

"No!" Ares barked. "Xena is mine. And don't for a second underestimate her importance here. If she isn't neutralized, I can guarantee that you won't get what you want. She lives for disrupting the plans of the wicked."

"Wicked?" Jasper gasped in offense. "I'd hardly call saving the country 'wicked'."

"Jasper, shut up," Ares replied. "You're a self-serving, lying charlatan and we both know it. If you want to mask it in sound bites like 'family values' and 'moral compass', I couldn't be less interested. My point is this: someone else is going to be looking for this hacker. If she finds Xero before you or I do, you very well may see all of your plans ruined."

"I'll contact my source. I think I've heard of Xero--she's a big time, wanted hacker so she shouldn't be too hard to spot."

"Whatever," Ares replied dismissively. "But you'd better move quickly. Get your supporters online now. Xena is down but she isn't out. You have Pipeline ready to go tomorrow and it won't matter if Gabrielle finds her."

"Mr. Ares, I've explained to you that we need more time. Even pressuring everyone involved the soonest we could get test software would be a week."

"Tell your people to have it ready in four days," Ares replied, his voice cold and hard. "And

I want Xero found.”

“Maybe I could bring her to you personally and--” the line went dead. In his frustration Helms threw the mobile unit down on the nightstand, knocking the now empty glass of water over once again.

When next Xero woke it was to the sound of voices. She kept still, her breathing even. It took several moments of searching her memory to remember where she was and what had happened. The agonizing headache had been replaced by a feeling of numbness and utter exhaustion.

As Xero listened to the movements around her, she determined that Henry was seated on her left, Rielle on her right. She heard the sound of a match, then smelled the faint floral scent of the burning herbs. Lacking the energy and desire to announce herself awake, she decided to simply feign sleep until she slipped into unconsciousness once more.

“Why are you heating the needles?” Rielle asked, watching Henry carefully.

“The meridians are almost completely blocked. Even at this rate it’s going to take some time before she gets any feeling back in her lower legs, if she recovers at all.”

Rielle tried to ignore the dismal assessment. Xero would recover because she had to. Too much depended on her. “You said you spoke to her,” she said, trying to redirect the conversation a little. “Does she sound okay? You were worried about brain damage.”

Xero could almost hear Henry shrug. “She’s already ‘brain damaged’ if you ask me. If she’s more damaged than before, I don’t know yet.” The hacker could hear him putting something down then he continued. “Did you have any luck with the computer?”

“I got one drive running, but there’s chance of sending or receiving messages. It’s just a dumb retrieval program, a safe one I hope.”

“That was quick work,” Henry allowed. “You know your way around hardware.”

“I started off in hardware when I was younger,” Rielle replied. “I took a lot of systems management and software classes in school. Online law enforcement seemed the natural progression. If I hadn’t gone that route, I’m sure my curiosity would have led me to hacking.”

“And here you are with a hacker anyway,” Henry replied. “How ironic. It isn’t too late for you, Rielle, you can still turn her in.”

“Why do you hate her so much?” Rielle asked hotly, feeling very protective of the unconscious outlaw. “What she does for a living is wrong, and I know she isn’t the nicest person, but this goes way beyond that.”

When Henry spoke his voice was tight, the fight to keep his emotions in check evident. “You saw for yourself what she did to my wife--”

“The way I hear it, you backed out of your marriage contract early and threw your wife out of the house.”

“Xero tell you that?” he asked, surprised and defensive.

Rielle nodded. “She said you visited twice after that. When she first started hacking and when she was injured. What I want to know, is who took care of your ex-wife after her eye replacement surgery? Those are high maintenance procedures. They have to be treated every few hours or the body rejects the implant.”

Neither spoke for long moments, Rielle’s words hanging heavily in the air. When Henry finally broke the silence his tone was sad, defeated.

“Hackers do take care of their own. Rielle, my marriage fell apart for a lot of reasons. I would have gone insane had I stayed for the entire contract and Renée would have, too. Once I quit the business, it became too much of a strain for us to be together with her still on the inside.” He shook his head, dismissing her. “I guess unless you’re married yourself, it’s impossible to understand.”

Rielle laughed bitterly. “Oh, I’m married alright, almost the same boat as you. I’m three years into a five year contract. And I want out.” Henry looked at her waiting for her to continue. The sycop looked back down at their patient, smoothing a strand of hair away from her face. “Her

name is Paula,” she continued. “It’s funny almost--she always seemed so close to everything I was looking for, but there was always something missing. I finally decided to stop looking and just get married. The first couple of years were fine, pretty good in fact. But then when I started dreaming about Xena and Gabrielle and began to remember who I am...” She trailed off.

“So what is it you’re looking for?” Henry asked as he readied another needle.

“Her.” Rielle replied softly.

Xero winced at the comment just as a needle was pierced into her leg. “Ow,” she croaked, her eyes fluttering open.

“Don’t be such a baby,” Henry snapped, clearly annoyed. He looked sadly at Rielle for a moment longer than began to remove the needles from the hacker’s body. “Why don’t you take her to the pond. Let her soak for a half hour. The fever is still hanging around, so it couldn’t hurt.”

Rielle nodded and stood, moving to the head of the soft pallet. “Pond?” the hacker asked dubiously.

“You’ve been unconscious the other times,” Henry supplied. “You get to float with the fish a few times a day.”

“I’m not getting in that water,” Xero insisted.

“I’m afraid you don’t have much say in the matter,” Rielle replied with a grin. With a fluid movement, she picked up the edge of Xero’s cot and began to drag the travois towards the door. When she tried to struggle, Xero realized she couldn’t feel her feet.

“You’re paralyzed from just above your knees down.” Henry explained. “Your lower spine got zapped pretty bad. Do yourself a favor and do what Rielle says. You’re recovering in spite of yourself, so don’t screw it up now.” He stood, and with a disappointed sigh directed at Rielle, went upstairs.

“Let me guess, he’s jealous,” Xero quipped, trying to mask her uncertainty as Rielle dragged the cot outside.

The sun was still out, hanging heavily over the expanse of ocean, blocked by the house. It was light and the day’s warmth clung to the grass and rocks ringing the pond. “Jealous?” Rielle wondered aloud. “I don’t think so. He hates your profession more than you personally I think. Although he pretty much hates you personally too,” she added after a moment’s reflection.

Carefully, Rielle set the cot down near the edge of the pond and extracted several large towels from a compartment underneath, then began to undress.

“A cold bath *and* a show?” Xero quipped dryly, not trying to hide her appreciative gaze from the syscop. “Do you want me turned on or off?”

“Quit being such an ass will you?” Rielle shot back. “The water is fucking cold. It’s even colder when your clothes are soaked. Trust me, I know. Now, if you’d be so good as to roll into the water...” She left her words hanging and began to get annoyed when it became clear that the hacker wasn’t going to comply.

“I can’t swim,” Xero announced at last through clenched teeth.

“Who said anything about swimming?” Rielle asked, taking off her sweat pants. “You just have to float. You’ve been doing it for two days now. One more and you’ll get that merit badge.”

“I was unconscious at the time,” Xero reminded the syscop, looking with disapproval at the pond when she noticed other things already inhabiting the water.

“I could knock you out,” Rielle offered. “But I suspect you’ll be pretty pissed when you come to. Trust me, just roll into the water, I’ll catch you.”

“No.”

“Have it your way then.”

Before she could protest, Rielle had grabbed the side of the cot and gave it a swift turn. Xero was rolled on her side and dumped straight into the water, Rielle sliding into the pond an instant later.

“Xero, stop thrashing!” the smaller woman shouted as the hacker struggled against the sheet still wrapped around her body. Something about the syscop’s tone brought a momentary pause to her struggling. Instantly, she felt strong arms wrap around her middle, one arm supporting her

weight in the water, the other untangling her from the sheet. “There you go, you’re fine. I’ve got you.” Rielle’s voice was assured, confident, and in moments Xero’s arms were free so she could hold on to the rocks that ringed the pond.

“You fucking bitch,” Xero growled, shivering more from fear than from the cold water.

“It’s the company I keep,” Rielle shot back smoothly. Xero tried briefly to hoist her body out of the water, only to discover that she simply didn’t have the strength needed. “You don’t have it in you to do much but float,” Rielle commented after watching the hacker struggle for a moment.

“This is fucked,” she finally grumbled, giving up on getting out of the pond and easing back into the cold water. She held onto the rocks by the edge of the pool, and refused to look at her companion.

“I could teach you how to swim, you know,” Rielle offered after a moment’s silence.

“I’d better not be in the water long enough to need it,” the hacker grumbled. Then, trying to get her mind off her predicament, she asked, “When did you learn how?”

“When I went to summer camp,” Rielle answered. To prove her point, she moved through the water with practiced ease, alternating between a variety of strokes. Xero watched, trying to think of anything but the fear twisting in her already aching body like a knife. After a couple of moments, Rielle smoothly glided back to Xero’s side, easily treading water next to the hacker.

“I don’t suppose you ever went to summer camp?” she asked. Xero didn’t answer, only shook her head. “Then let me show you what it’s like,” Rielle coaxed. She eased her arms around the hacker’s middle, tugging gently. “Just let go,” she whispered near Xero’s left ear. “I’ve got you.”

The body pressed against her back was so warm, Xero could feel her arms stretch as she tried to stay in contact with it as Rielle moved away from the edge of the pool. One hand came free before she realized what was happening. With a frantic grasp, her fingers attached themselves to the rock once again. Rielle smiled, she’d had more progress than she expected.

Easing around in front of the hacker’s body, Rielle ducked under the surface. She came up for air between the hacker and the rock wall, wrapping her hands around the muscular biceps that framed her head. Xero’s strong hands clung to the rocks like limpets. “This isn’t so bad now, is it?” Rielle asked, looking into blue eyes clouded with fear and anger.

Xero readied a sarcastic come back when she was struck by just how inviting the body in front of her appeared. “It could be worse,” she whispered as she leaned in to claim the soft lips that had captivated her attention.

Rielle melted into the warm, confident kiss, every fiber of her being screaming in recognition. Memories of Gabrielle experiencing Xena’s kiss for the first time surged through her mind as her lips moved against the hacker’s. It felt so much like the heated warlordly Xena, fresh from battle. While it wasn’t the Xena Gabrielle knew the best, it was something Gabrielle, and Rielle for that matter couldn’t help but respond to.

Xero deepened the kiss, sighing in contentment as the sycop welcomed the exploration of her lips and tongue. She began to lose herself in the sensations as she pressed firmly into the soft pliant flesh in front of her, pinning Rielle to the rock wall behind.

With a startled gasp, Rielle jumped as she felt her body pinned. Xero ignored her, seeking her lips out once again, this time even more hungry and aggressive.

“Xero, stop it!” Rielle demanded, when she could no longer move.

“What?” the hacker murmured near her ear. “You don’t like it rough? I bet you do.”

Rielle shuddered as Xero let go of the rock ledge with one hand, letting it drop into the water and explore her body. There was too much familiarity in the touch. Too many liberties taken without permission. Even though she could feel her body respond, she could feel her heart shy away from the touch. In spite of what her memory told her, this wasn’t Xena. Not the Xena that loved her at any rate.

“Come back here,” Xero growled and claimed the sycop’s lips once more. Even in her weakened state, the hacker was still strong. The mass of her body alone was enough to trap the smaller woman. Rielle found that the harder she struggled, the more intense the hacker’s kisses became, devastating her senses like a hurricane. Not knowing what else to do that wouldn’t seriously

hurt the larger woman, Rielle waited until the hacker's tongue forced inside her mouth once more, then bit down. The bite wasn't hard, but it was enough to startle the hacker and let her slip out of the larger woman's crushing embrace. Ducking under the water once more, Rielle surfaced several feet away from the hacker well out of grabbing distance.

"What's the matter, baby?" Xero murmured in a taunting voice. "Wasn't it good for you?"

"What part of 'no' don't you understand?" Rielle demanded.

"The part where you're throwing yourself at me."

Rielle thought about it for a minute and blushed. "You're right, I did. I'm sorry, it was a mistake. I thought it'd...ah...be different."

"Next time we play for keeps, kiddo," Xero replied, seemingly unaffected by the exchange.

"I'm sorry I bit you," Rielle finally added, determined to get it out in the open.

"Not a problem," the hacker purred with a smile. "I like it."

Blushing to the roots of her hair, Rielle took a sudden interest in her feet treading water.

"I...um...guess you would," she finally mumbled, not knowing what else to say. "With the...er...rings and all."

Xero laughed, a genuinely amused laugh that had Rielle looking at her shocked. "So I take it Mrs. Syscop doesn't have pierced nipples?" Rielle shook her head, interested in her feet once again. "I guess Xena didn't either?"

"I...I don't know," Rielle admitted. "I don't think so."

"Too bad," the hacker allowed. "So, where did you meet Mrs. Syscop anyway?"

Rielle frowned, then decided to ignore the sarcasm. "Paula and I met at the '36 Belfast Olympics. I was part of the system security detail for the Online Pavilion; she was competing. I bumped into her at the International Federation of Fencing booth."

"Lemme guess," Xero said with a grin, "You found out she 'sword fought' and your knees went weak."

"Something like that," Rielle blushed, embarrassed that her attraction to the warrior type was so apparent. "Actually, Paula's a pentathlete—running, swimming, riding, and shooting, too."

"Sounds like I have stiff competition," the hacker suggested with a smirk.

"Get over yourself, Xero. Until you learn some manners, you aren't even in the running." Rielle spoke with more confidence than she felt. Even now, treading water six feet away from the hacker, she couldn't deny the effect the outlaw had on her. She struggled to stay focused on the other woman's face, but frequently her eyes dipped down to note the muscular form static in the cold water. Rielle knew it was too much to hope that Xero had somehow missed her visual indiscretions. It all seemed like a game to the hacker. She shifted, moving her body and watched the syscop try not to notice. Rielle failed every time.

"You want it both ways, Rielle," Xero observed, shifting her hold on the rock ledge once again. "You want a warlord, but you want to be on top as well. It don't work that way. If what you want is someone to come crawling on her knees, begging to fuck you, then don't chase me. It ain't gonna happen. Go back to your wife for that."

Rielle glanced away. The words stung because she knew they were true, and that it was exactly what she wanted.

"So, any more visits from our buddy, Ares?" Xero asked, finally ready to change the subject.

Rielle nodded. "Yeah, two more members of Congress unsubbed. Their bodies were found in their offices yesterday. I have to think that some more hackers got fried too, but that hasn't been in any of the news searches. Any idea how Ares found you?"

Xero shook her head. "With the program I was using, it would have been like looking for a book mark hidden in a library. Whoever Ares is, he's got major firepower."

An alarm sounded on Rielle's watch and she smiled. "Time to get you out of the water. Henry wants you to nap for a bit to get your strength back, and then we'll try to get some food in you."

Xero opened her eyes as a shiver ran up her spine. It was night and the evening chill was cold against her bare feet. "Is there some reason I have to freeze my fucking feet off in these God damned dreams," she shouted to no one in particular.

"I find it odd myself," Janice replied calmly from behind her. "But I don't make the rules here." The archeologist had been leaning against a tree, dressed in her usual attire. Mel stood next to her wearing a short skirt and matching jacket.

"Well, who does make the rules then? I wanna talk to them," the hacker demanded bitterly.

"Why are you in such a foul mood?" Janice asked. "Having 'girl trouble'?"

"You seem to be up on my every thought, so why don't you tell me?" Xero shot back. The frown on the hacker's face deepened as she watched Janice and Mel exchange glances. "What?" she demanded.

"We didn't expect things to be quite so rocky," Mel explained gently.

The hacker wasn't mollified. "Tell that to the sycop. Half the time she's a walking come on, and the other half she acts like I've got the plague."

"She can't really help it," Janice soothed. "On the one hand, she's got two millennia's of memories making her crazy about you. Then you open your mouth and she can't remember what it was she saw in you in the first place."

The hacker took a menacing step toward the archeologist who held her ground. Mel stepped in between the women, doing her best to diffuse the eminent battle. "What Janice is trying to say is that so much of you is like Xena for her, but there's still an unknown, alien quality too. She's afraid that you mean much more to her than she'll ever mean to you."

Xero rolled her eyes. "What's the big deal? We're just talking a little sex here."

Janice took a step forward, her hand going to her bullwhip. "It's a lot more than that to her, hacker, and until you feel it too just keep your hands to yourself."

If Janice planned to say any more, she didn't get the chance. A guttural groan from nearby drew the attention of the three women. Xero walked the short distance to the trees, whistling approvingly when she found the source of the noise.

"Interesting technique," she commented. "Who's the bob?"

"Janice!" Mel sputtered, her cheeks flushed crimson. "What are we doing here?"

"It's Xena's seventeenth birthday. I guess we're celebrating," Janice replied.

Xena was nude, save for a bracelet, and positioned astride the hips of her companion who wore only his boots and pants, the latter of which were pulled down past his hips. Moving rhythmically together, it was soon evident where most of the noise was coming from.

"His name is Petracles," Janice explained. "Xena met him about a year ago. A wanna-be warlord, he's got the charisma, but isn't overly bright."

"He seems to have other assets," Xero commented with a grin, watching the muscular form of the man writhe in pleasure beneath Xena. He spoke in fractured phrases, little of it making sense except that he highly approved of what Xena was doing and didn't want her to stop any time soon. Xero watched the way Xena moved, the way she touched her breasts and ground her hips into her partner's. Her smile was sexy, her expression wanton. "She's using him," the hacker observed.

Janice shook her head sadly. "I'm afraid she's not. She thought she was, but he's only next in a long line of people who are going to fall short of her expectations."

"Oh my!" Mel gasped as Petracles groaned Xena's name with a final, furious thrust, then lay still.

"By the gods, Xena, you are magnificent," Petracles panted as he struggled for air. "How I look forward to spending endless nights with you in the circle of my arms."

Xena smiled warmly and leaned forward to kiss her lover. "That will be soon enough, my love," she murmured. "I've heard Poteidaia is small, weak. You should get supplies there before we move the army out."

The warrior laughed. "Always thinking of work, aren't you Xena. You take the hunting party and get some game, and I'll meet you with the rest of the army. Tell me, have I ever not taken a suggestion of yours? We'll get supplies at Poteidaia before moving on."

"You take my suggestions because I'm always right," Xena purred as she shifted position. "And come to think of it, I have another suggestion for you."

"Doesn't look to me like Xena is particularly let down," Xero observed. Petracles had shifted position, rolling Xena onto her back. She moaned contentedly as his lips and hands began to explore her body.

“You’ll see,” Janice said cryptically and began to walk away from the scene.

“Oh, come on!” Xero protested, “it was just getting good!”

“The last thing we need is you waking up in that kind of mood,” Mel insisted as the tree women made their way back through the trees. When they emerged, it was dawn and a small group of men were clustered around Xena, waiting.

“So what’s up?” Xero asked.

Janice shrugged. “Cortese’s raid on Amphipolis was almost two years ago. We’re at another crossroads for Xena. Rhea and Thithis were only the first of many villages to be raided by her army. They got it the worst, of course. A number of villagers fled and Xena trailed them to whichever villages gave them refuge. For a time, that was how she picked her targets.”

“What about Amphipolis?” Xero asked.

Mel shook her head sadly. “They were quite accepting of Xena’s spoils until the town was rebuilt. Once repairs were completed, the council of elders had a change of heart and now she’s an outlaw in her own village.”

Before she could say any more, one of the men with Xena pointed to a dust cloud on the horizon, barely visible in the early dawn. “Someone’s coming!”

As the dust cloud got closer, the thunder of hoofbeats could be heard. At the sound, Xena frowned. “Where in Hades are the rest of them?” she muttered. A dozen men on horseback came to a halt at the edge of the trees where Xena and her men waited. The largest man quickly dismounted and hurried over. “Where are the others, Darnelle? Where’s Petracles?” she demanded.

The man lowered his head respectfully before speaking. “There are no others, Xena. Petracles took your army and is headed south.”

“What?” Xena thundered.

Darnelle looked around cautiously before answering. “He tricked you. He never intended to attack Poteidaia. He said it wasn’t worth the effort. Once we separated from you, we headed east. As soon as we got to Bascilla, he started making preparations to attack.”

“And no one said anything?” Xena asked, barely keeping her rage in check.

“Of course we said something. That was when he gave us the option to leave. Any men loyal enough to you to forego the spoils of Bascilla was welcome to leave. That’s what the twelve of us are doing here.”

Xena fought to control her emotions as she considered her options. “Why did you come back?” she asked, biding her time while she thought of what to do.

Darnelle grinned. “Marcus and I aren’t stupid,” he said. “Neither are the others. Petracles may have a decent sized army, but we know who did the tactical planning for our raids. Besides, I’m willing to back anyone that could turn me from a blacksmith into a gladiator.”

Xena smiled briefly, an action that had Xero puzzled.

“What’s she smiling about?” the hacker wondered aloud. “This whole thing sucks. I mean, I guess she shouldn’t be too upset about the broken betrothal thing, it looks like she got a good fuck out of it. But taking her army... I hope she rips his balls off when she catches up to him.”

“Actually,” Mel countered gently, “Xena is more upset about the loss of Petracles than of her army at the moment. She isn’t a monster yet. She’s a young woman who has just had her heart broken for the first time. She’s smiling so she won’t start crying in front of what’s left of her men.”

“I admit this is a harsh way for her to spend her seventeenth birthday. But you know getting into Xena’s bed was easy,” Janice continued, “but getting into her heart was another matter. Kinda like someone else I know.”

“Fuck you,” Xero muttered.

Once her men had been debriefed, Xena moved off to a fire by herself, and Xero followed. She was a fair distance away from everyone else, the chatter behind her barely registering in her ears. It was then that Xero could see the tears fall freely. The hacker smiled, seeing that the tears were more from anger than sadness. “Good for you,” she said quietly, even though she knew the warrior couldn’t hear her. “The guy was an asshole. You’re better off without him.”

“I believed you,” Xena muttered to the fire as her eye caught the glint off her betrothal bracelet. Furiously, she tore the jewelry from her wrist and threw it into the flames. “Someday you’re going to regret this,” she whispered. She wasn’t sure why, but Xero felt a shiver run up and down her spine at the words. For a seventeen year old, Xena of

Amphipolis had mastered rage.

After wiping the tears from her cheeks, she stood and returned to her men. "Marcus, you're with me. We're going to do some scouting."

"Where to, Xena?" Darnelle asked.

"Poteidaia is near by," Xena explained. "Marcus and I will check it out. It might be worth a visit after all." The men cheered as Marcus went to get their horses."

"Don't tell me we're riding horses?" Xero asked as the trio followed Xena and Marcus to their mounts.

"Well, you want to see what happens, don't you?" Janice asked as she handed the reins of another horse to Mel.

"This will never do," the Southerner muttered, looking down at her outfit. She walked around to the side of the horse to mount. When she did, Xero was surprised to see her neatly dressed in tan jodphurs, a crisp white shirt, and a trim riding jacket.

"It's a dream, remember?" Janice quipped, mounting her own horse. "I don't suppose you ride?"

"Are you kidding?" Xero shot back. "Until today I've never even seen a real horse."

"Then ride with me," Janice offered, extending her arm. After a moment's hesitation, her curiosity got the better of her and Xero accepted the offered hand. She settled herself behind the archeologist, smiling slightly at just how well the smaller woman's body fit against her own.

Marcus and Xena rode through the morning. The pace was easy and it didn't take too long before Xero felt moderately comfortable on horse back. Around noon they crested the hill overlooking the quiet village of Poteidaia.

"What do you think?" Janice asked when she reined her horse to a stop.

Xero looked at the scattered buildings some distance away. It was quiet, peaceful, and most likely prosperous. "Looks good," she answered, "like a farming community. I don't think Xena should have much trouble with it."

"Wrong again," Janice replied with a laugh. "Xena is about to be defeated by an army of one. Let's go."

Janice, Mel, and Xero dismounted and followed Marcus and Xena to a wooded area near a stream by the village. Xena's keen hearing picked up voices and she signaled Marcus for silence. At her gesture, he stayed put as she moved in.

A group of women approached the stream carrying baskets of laundry. Children accompanied the women, very young boys and girls ranging from toddlers through adolescents. One girl in particular caught Xero's eye and she looked over at Janice. "Another crossroads, right?" she asked.

"Hacker's catching on," Janice replied with a smile.

The women chatted animatedly as they worked, washing the clothes in the swiftly moving stream. There was a nervous, agitated quality to the women's banter.

"I hear they raided Calsica not two months ago," one woman said to her companion. "That witch has tracked down every victim of Thithis and killed them. I tell you Hecuba, it's only a matter of time before she descends on Poteidaia."

"I pray to the gods Xena of Amphipolis never steps foot in Poteidaia," Hecuba replied solemnly. "Gabrielle, please hand me your father's clothes--over there. Lila, help your sister."

Xero watched the two go after the large basket. She would have known Gabrielle anywhere. While the hair was much lighter, almost blond, her features were unmistakable. She looked about nine years old, the dark-haired sister about six. Awkwardly, the girls brought the basket of laundry and set to work at the chores assigned--Gabrielle helped with scrubbing, Lila with rinsing.

"I think Xena should come here," Gabrielle said suddenly.

The circled elders looked at the child critically. "Don't say such things, Gabrielle," Heccuba scolded.

"The story teller that came through town said her home was destroyed by someone else," Gabrielle continued, undaunted. "He said the people of Thithis helped. I think she's chasing them because she's hurting. If she came here, and we let her have a home, maybe she wouldn't hurt anymore. Then she wouldn't hurt anyone else."

"Gabrielle is stupid," Lila remarked.

"I'd rather share my room with Xena the warlord than you," she shot back.

"Girls, that's enough," Hecuba scolded. "Gabrielle, while that's a nice sentiment, I think it would take more than a home for Xena to stop hurting people."

"No, it wouldn't."

Xero looked over at Xena in surprise at the words the warrior had whispered, almost silently, to herself. Vibrant blue eyes were riveted on the nine year old.

“Let me guess,” the hacker commented as the foursome made their way back to Marcus and the horses. “Xena decided to leave Poteidaia alone?”

Janice grinned. “More than that. She left land altogether. It made sense, really. If a little town like Poteidaia knew about her, chances are the other inland villages would have to. She decided to take to the sea. She still focused on the merchant fleets of cities that failed to support Amphipolis. It was also something she could do with a small crew. A pretty brilliant move, actually.”

“So, when she met Gabrielle later, did she remember who she was?” Xero asked.

This time it was Mel who grinned. “It was no accident that Xena headed home by way of Poteidaia years later when she finally left the warlord trade. She thought about Gabrielle often in the early days.”

Xero chuckled. “Big bad warrior,” she muttered.

“Big dumb hacker,” Janice added, her own voice amused.

*Lab mouse slaughterhouse, medicine won't cure my ills
Tongue tied genocide, words may hurt but silence kills
St. Johnny wants to be in pictures, no one left to quote the scriptures now
Joy stick politics, kills another sacred cow
— Barbara K*

Chapter 4: Blamestorming

Rielle scooped some warm water into a cup and carefully poured it over the hacker's long ebony hair. The water trickled down, falling into a large bucket under the cot where the outlaw slept. A sensuous smile eased across her face as she ran her fingers through the wet, silky tresses. Movements almost as practiced as a warrior sharpening her sword.

Henry watched silently for a moment, frowning slightly. “Even sleeping tigers are cute, I suppose.”

Rielle's smile broadened. “I don't think she's as bad as all that. Besides, people struggled to save tigers from extinction for a reason, right?”

Taking a seat on the coffee table next to her, he shook his head. “I like you, Rielle, I really do. You've got your shit together. But you've got no business being mixed up with this kind of animal.”

Putting down the water cup, Rielle spent a few moments massaging the unconscious woman's scalp and neck. When she spoke, there was a regretfulness in her voice that surprised the healer. “I'm not the sweetness and light you think I am, Henry. I've done plenty in my past that I need to atone for. If part of that is putting up with a disagreeable hacker, then so be it.”

The healer smiled sadly, another piece of the puzzle that was Rielle MacGab snapping into place. “Who's past, Rielle?” he asked gently. “Yours or Gabrielle's?”

She didn't look at him when she whispered, “They're one and the same.”

“Rielle, if you think I'm trying to scare you, you're right. I don't care what you or Gabrielle have done, but I'm certain that messing with this monster is more atonement than is required.” His tone was gentle, but Rielle bristled at the comment anyway. He continued before she could speak. “Take a look at her neck.”

Rielle stared at him a moment before moving the hacker's hair to the side and examining her neck. “Two scars,” she murmured to herself. “At the base of her skull.”

“Xero's twisted, bent. She's a product of the system,” he explained as Rielle just stared at him, clearly not comprehending. “I grew up in an orphanage too,” he explained. “I was lucky. It was a good place, and I didn't get moved around. But we heard stories. Those scars are from point blank taser burns. It was home-made ECT in the kid farms. Kids that got moved around a lot, had

problems adjusting... sometimes getting zapped would fix 'em. Make 'em mellow. Other times it just fucked them up. Usually those kids went straight from one institution to another, either prison or psyche farm."

"You don't think people can change?" she asked quietly.

"Sure, some people, but not all. The younger you start, the better chance you have of fixing 'em. At some point you have to accept that they're too far gone and just try to stay out of their way. Besides, it isn't like Xero's ever done a single thing in her life to repair the damage that's been done. You won't see people like her in therapy.

"Rielle, listen to me. Xero is a hacker for a very good reason. It's risky and demanding as hell. She can't be effective and let emotional thoughts intrude. She works so she won't *have* to feel. She eats and sleeps so she can work some more. Most hacker's take uppers to keep from dreaming. Renée did, and I bet she does too." He shrugged. "This isn't the kind of person who sends out Christmas cards. She doesn't go to a movie on a Friday night with a bunch of friends. She doesn't take someone out to dinner because it's their birthday. If you let her, she *will* hurt you. And I don't want that to happen." He gently touched her cheek with one hand, then headed up the stairs, leaving Rielle alone with the Xero and her thoughts.

"I'm sorry I didn't find you earlier," she whispered to the unconscious woman as she poured some shampoo into her hands. "Your lives are never easy, are they?"

The grinning form of the archeologist faded from view as Xero's awareness shifted. The hacker focused on a persistent tugging at her hair. The sensation wasn't unpleasant, rather, it felt exquisite. After a few moments of careful consideration, and the soft sounds of splashing water, the hacker realized that her hair was being washed. "Who do I have to kill to get some undisturbed sleep around here?" she grumbled sleepily.

"It's about time you woke up," Rielle replied in a cheerful voice. "Your little naps have been anywhere from eight to twelve hours. Henry said your fever has broken and you need to start getting your strength back."

"Right," the hacker mumbled then tried to move. "Don't listen to everything Henry says. He hates me, remember." Xero was surprised to find herself naked, wrapped only in a thin sheet. "What day is it?"

"You came on to me in the pond yesterday if that helps," Rielle answered. Noting the hacker's confusion about her nakedness she continued, "Your clothes have been off since we dumped you in the pond four days ago after Ares nearly unsubbed you. Made sense to leave 'em off, less effort. Henry has been giving you regular acupuncture treatments and it's easier to wash you that way."

"You've been bathing me?" Xero asked, her eyebrow arching.

Rielle didn't flinch. "Is that a problem?"

"Oh no," the hacker replied with a smirk. "I'm just sorry I slept through it."

Rielle wasn't shaken by the hacker's flirtatiousness. "If you'd been awake, you could have bathed yourself. If you can stop thinking with your crotch for just a moment, things are getting a little more dire in the real world. Now would be a good time to come up with a plan."

Xero laughed bitterly. "Not me, sister. Sure, I want to know who unsubbed Bat, but I'm not going to find out by joining her. I think I've done enough. Why don't you go back to your wife and we'll file this little adventure to memory?" Rielle listened to Xero's ranting for a moment as she dried her hair. When she finished she picked up a comb and began to untangle the dark locks. "Well?" the hacker finally asked when she received no response.

"I'm just waiting for you to get over yourself, that's all," Rielle replied pleasantly. "You're shaken up now, and I don't blame you. You've gone through a terrifying experience that has already killed quite a few people. You're a lot of things, Xero, but quitter isn't one of them. Fact is, the nets aren't safe for you or any of your buddies until Ares is dealt with. You'll come around. You're just not cut out for a low tech existence."

"Someone else'll solve it," the hacker grumbled. "Hackers won't put up with that kind of

shit for long.”

“I’m afraid you’re wrong. Xena is the only one that ever been able to get the better of Ares. If you don’t take him out, your secret little hacker society is going to crumble along with our government,” Rielle said forcefully as she focused on a stubborn tangle.

“Democracy falls. Isn’t that a little melodramatic?” the hacker asked with a wince.

“Sorry,” the syscop apologized, easing up. “You think I’m kidding? I’m not. Two more cabinet members have died as well as six more members of Congress. A lot of people are too scared to log on. They’re having their underlings do it.”

“And you think someone else is buying off the underlings?” Xero asked, struggling to sit up when Rielle had finished with her hair. She managed with some difficulty. Her body felt almost foreign to her. Her muscles had begun to atrophy and her skin was sickly pale; thankfully, there were no mirrors in the room. Slowly, the gravity of her situation sank in. She’d come close to a fate many others had already experienced. While the thought scared her to her very core, it also made her quite angry, and anger was something Xero was good at.

“I think it’s possible,” Rielle answered. “Administrative assistants are being forced to do more of the real work online because their bosses are too scared to do it themselves. They’d be easy enough to buy. They don’t make the same kind of money, political loyalty is expensive. Why wouldn’t they sell out? Here, drink this—Henry left instructions to take it.” Efficiently, she settled the mug between the hacker’s hands, making sure she had a good grip.

“Where did he go?”

“To Carmel for a few supplies. Don’t worry, he isn’t going to turn you in.” Rielle watched her companion with interest as she dubiously sniffed the broth. “It’s miso soup. Don’t worry it won’t bite. You haven’t had any solid food for days, so we need to take it easy on your system.”

“How can you be so sure, about Henry I mean?” the hacker asked, taking a tentative sip. The soup wasn’t half bad, she realized. A little salty, it was smooth none the less and didn’t have the unpleasant tang of rough water.

Rielle shrugged. “He’s not protecting you as much as himself. He doesn’t want corporate systems descending on his little haven here any more than you want them crashing the hackers. Come on, as long as you’re conscious, you might as well look at what I’ve found.”

Xero rolled her eyes. The syscop was nothing if not persistent. Shifting to a more comfortable position, she adjusted the sheet wrapped around her body. Rielle headed upstairs, returning with a soft pair of grey sweats. Without comment, she helped the hacker dress.

“I can’t feel my feet,” Xero announced flatly as Rielle helped her with a pair of running shoes and socks. The hacker managed to sit up on the low cot. With her legs extended in front of her, she looked even more lanky and awkward than she was.

“Can you feel this?” Rielle asked, firmly grasping the base of Xero’s calf with her hands. The hacker shook her head and Rielle moved her hands up to mid calf. “What about this?” Again, the response was negative. “Here?” Rielle asked, moving her hands to Xero’s knee. Her brow furrowed in concern when the hacker answered ‘no’ once more.

“That doesn’t make sense,” she muttered to herself. Slowly, she moved her hands up the hacker’s thigh, her fingers trailing over the material of the sweat pants. She only stopped when a sharp indrawn breath caught her attention. With a frown, she glared at Xero. “You’re faking it, aren’t you?” she demanded

Xero grinned back down at her. “I just wanted to see how far you’d go. Seriously though, I don’t have any feeling below mid thigh.”

The syscop quickly removed her hands from the hacker’s leg, blushing furiously at being taken. She realized then just how accustomed she’d become to touching Xero’s body, but was a much different experience with the outlaw awake. Briefly, she wondered which would wear off first—her attraction or Xero’s amnesia. She hoped it was the latter and was embarrassed for thinking so. It would be much easier to deal with the difficult woman if her own emotions didn’t constantly cloud her own thoughts and actions. Easier, but apparently not possible.

It took some doing, but Rielle managed to maneuver Xero into a chair. Seated at a large table in the work room the hacker looked around, realizing that several days had indeed passed. Gone were the dust coverings over the furniture and equipment. At the work table, an assortment of hard copy printouts were stacked, waiting for her perusal.

With a resigned grumble, Xero read through the documents. The sensation of reading print on paper was strange, foreign, and she found the concentration it required taxing. As if on cue, Rielle appeared at her elbow, holding a steaming cup of tea.

“Why don’t you take a break?” the syscop suggested. “Tell me what you think.”

Xero accepted the offered cup of tea. It smelled like mint. After an experimental sip, she nodded approvingly. “Well, this is fine for only having half the picture. Did you log on to get these?”

“No,” Rielle replied emphatically. “The system is set up for dumb retrieval only. No interactivity, it can search news nodes but that’s it.”

“Fine,” Xero muttered, picking up a pen that was laying on the table. “Go to this site,” she instructed as she wrote down the complicated address in the margin of one of the printed sheets. “When you get there, reconfigure the monitor setting for inverse. Once you’re looking at the negative image print the third story for each day we’ve been out of town.”

Rielle accepted the paper and sat down to work, keying in the address and search parameters. “Xero, this is a collection of wrestling statistics,” she complained when the requested articles had been retrieved.

“So that’s who’s using the address now?” the hacker snorted. “It’s been so long since I’ve used the site, I forgot who had it.”

“Okay,” Rielle continued, “I’ve inverted the monitor and now I’ve got garbage.”

“Print out the garbage and hand it over,” Xero replied with a grin.

When the requested pages had been handed to her, she carefully folded the first sheet in half. When she finished she held it up to the light, looking at it thoughtfully.

“What is it?” Rielle asked.

Xero handed the folded paper and proceeded to fold the next. “Messages from The ‘Horn. We piggy-back info on the third story of whatever’s on that site. The Saddlehorn Gazette. It’s a way to keep in touch if you’re underground and can’t risk logging on to the main node. MaryD maintains the encryption. She really whipped it into shape when she came on board. She and Shadow monitor most of the node traffic. According to this, fifty-six hackers have been mysteriously unsubbed. There have been wakes at the ‘Horn every night. Hacking rates are going up due to the danger. Damn, some people are going to get rich off this. Someone seems to be in a hurry to make people panic.”

“If they live that long,” Rielle added. “Do you know any of the unsubbed?”

The hacker nodded. “I knew all of them.” She read for a few moments more then looked over at her companion. “Hand me some of that blank paper.”

The hours passed quickly. Xero occupied herself with reading the encrypted messages and checking the information against the articles printed by the syscop. Rielle watched the hacker carefully, looking for signs of fatigue. As impressed as she was by her companion’s endurance, she didn’t want let her overextend herself on her first real day conscious. She was just about to call a halt to the other woman’s work, when Xero pushed the stack of papers away.

“I think I know what’s going on,” she announced.

“Care to share it?” Rielle prompted.

“There doesn’t seem to be much of a pattern determining just who is unsubbed and who isn’t. Reformists have been left alone because no one takes them seriously.”

“So Ares isn’t worried about Reformists,” Rielle said as she nodded.

“Right. Or whoever Ares is doing this for isn’t worried about them. We’ve got a Democrat in power and they seem to be the big target. But it isn’t just Democrats. There are a number of Republicans that have been offed as well. Ones that were interested in working with the President to

resolve a number of issues. The Republicans unsubbed also apposed the more rabid fringe of their party.”

“The Conservatives?” Rielle clarified.

The hacker nodded. “The ‘Horn routinely tracks the amount of time logged on the nets by various politicians, among others. I’ve been looking at it to see who is more frightened by what’s going on. If a group isn’t worried about online time, there may be a reason. There has been absolutely no drop off in Senator Helms’ net time from before this started until now. And almost no drop off from his key people.”

“I didn’t think he logged on at all?” Rielle wondered. “He’s made his disdain for this kind of technology quite clear.”

“I know. Supposedly, he’s hardly on at all. For someone that hesitant about technology, don’t you think an event like this would scare him from the nets altogether? There’s more. The President has had to cancel all sorts of overseas stuff to deal with this problem at home. She’s averaging one funeral a day. Not good for someone who is supposed to be running a country.”

Her words were cut short by the sound of footfalls descending the steps. Henry had returned.

“Nice to see you conscious, and Rielle still clothed,” he commented in greeting.

“You’re just jealous,” Xero shot back, her voice devoid of humor.

Henry shrugged. “Of you maybe, but not her. I pity the woman that catches your eye.”

“We’ve made some headway,” Rielle announced, getting up from her chair and discreetly moving in between healer and patient. “Xero thinks Senator Helms might be involved in what’s happening.”

“Leave it to a Southie to blame us,” he muttered.

“Hey, you people elected him,” Xero shot back acidly.

Rielle shook her head in exasperation. “It isn’t like California has been two states for all that long--give it a rest.” Turning her attention to Henry, she gently chided, “You’ve got to admit, the man is an asshole.”

Henry shrugged. “Why not tell him that yourself? He’s supposed to be having dinner tonight at Deetjen’s. I stopped by there for lunch on my way back from Carmel; they’re griping about the security scans.”

“Why would he go there?” Xero wondered.

“What is Deetjens?” Rielle echoed.

“It’s a historical inn just up highway one,” Henry explained with a smile at Rielle. “Rather eclectic. My guess is Helms is heading down south for some reason and is meeting with someone on the way. Deetjens has the best food on the coast, it’s small, secluded and he can afford it.”

“If he’s this far down from Sacramento,” Xero mused as her eyes lit up. “I’ll bet he’s going to South California. I’d love to know why.”

Rielle looked at the hacker critically. “Oh, no you don’t. You can’t walk-- remember? I think beating the Senator to a pulp would be out of the question.”

Xero smiled. It was a lazy, sensual smile that made the syscop swallow reflexively. “Who said anything about violence? I think a simple bug would be much more illuminating, don’t you?”

“You’re crazy,” Henry interrupted. “You’re not going to get within 50 feet of him.”

“Me, no,” the hacker allowed. “But the gorgeous blond over here shouldn’t have any problem.”

Rielle blinked. Blinked again. “*Xero thinks I’m gorgeous?*” she thought. Coming to her senses with some effort, she shrugged indifferently. “No biggie, what are you proposing?”

“You can’t be serious,” Henry protested.

The hacker laughed. “Leave her alone. This is her ‘I’m a big tough butch’ act. She uses it in bars to pick up women.”

“If you’re the result, then you should agree that this is a dumb idea.” Henry replied without missing a beat.

“If you two can stop talking about me like I’m not here!” the syscop protested. “If you want

a bug planted, then start talking, Xero, otherwise shut up.”

“Okay, okay,” Xero allowed, deflecting Rielle’s anger with a hand gesture. “It’s simple. We reprogram the mike on a mobie unit. Give it an extra power source, like from one of the dead computers, to boost its range. His security will be carrying mobies anyway. Just try to snag it on one of the guards. Even if we can’t pick up on Helms’ conversation, we should manage to pull in whatever’s going on in their head sets, or maybe they’ll be talking about him.”

“Can you rig a mike like that?” Rielle asked, clearly impressed.

“Sure, I’ve got the tools on the bike. Henry, you got an extra mobie unit?”

The healer looked resigned as he nodded his head. “Yeah, I’ve also got some of Renée’s clothes upstairs. I’m sure she can find something suitable to wear.”

Bat’s clothes. Xero looked around and frowned, realizing that she was missing her dead friend’s baseball cap. “For a divorced guy, Henry,” she observed, vowing to find the cap later, “you sure have a hard time letting go.” He shrugged and ran a hand through his short blond hair. Handsome enough, it was still hard for her to picture her deceased associate with the holistic throwback.

“For a heartless thug, you seem to be having trouble acting like one.”

Xero was too tired to come up with a suitable comeback. A look at her watch told her it was already late afternoon. She didn’t have much time.

When Henry excused himself to return upstairs and fix dinner, Rielle left to get the tools from the motorcycle, leaving the hacker alone with her thoughts. She was concerned about the killings, the people she knew that she’d never see again, but for some reason she didn’t dwell on them. The reason was Rielle. The syscop intruded on her thoughts the way rock formations intruded on a still horizon. Xero had no trouble admitting an attraction, and absently wondered if forcing herself on the smaller woman would get her where she wanted to go. Puzzled, she reviewed the incident in the pond. The syscop responded all right, her body screaming an invitation. But she slipped from the hacker’s arms at the first opportunity.

Xero shook her head. That certainly didn’t keep the syscop from touching her. The hair washing thing was a sensual assault in its own right. Frustrated by an equation that had no solution, the hacker forced her thoughts elsewhere.

Those strange dreams. The only thing more frustrating than the ‘come here, go away’ syscop was her infuriating twin, the archeologist. Absently, she made a mental note to ask the archeologist how she died. Xero hoped that perhaps her dark haired companion offered her in a fit of frustration, similar to what she was feeling right now. Her thoughts then shifted to Xena.

‘I can’t be her,’ Xero reasoned to herself, unsure of why she felt compelled to deny it. *‘She’s a warlord, I’m a common criminal. It isn’t the same thing.’* Forced to play devil’s advocate, she acknowledged that they were both at the top of their respective professions. *‘So why don’t I remember any of it?’* So far she hadn’t seen anything in the ancient Greek woman’s life that would warrant the kind of memory block Janice and Mel were convinced she had.

“Oh, great. Now I’m treating them like real people,” Xero groaned to herself. She looked up, relieved when Rielle returned with the tools.

As Xero tweaked and fine-tuned the mobie unit to peak performance, Rielle did the same for her own appearance. Shedding the baggy functional sweats she’d lived in during Xero’s convalescence, Rielle returned in a formal dress of Bat’s. Simple black, clingy and sleeveless it showed off the best attributes of Rielle’s fit form. An elegant jacket went with it, black with subtle zebra stripes in silver thread. Xero didn’t pretend not to be impressed by the syscop’s appearance; she couldn’t have hidden her jaw dropping if she’d tried.

Scrambling to cover, she kidded the younger woman appropriately on her appearance, trying to mask her own sense of awe. Henry wasn’t fooled and said as much. That brought the hacker as close to genuine embarrassment as she’d been in years.

Still grinning, the healer handed over the keys to his car. “Just take the highway up about five miles. I had my friend make you a reservation. You’ll have no trouble getting in, and with the way

you look I'm sure you'll get close to Helms. Right Xero?"

The hacker frowned at Henry, then with a flick of her blue eyes, dismissed him. "No heroics here, be careful. Snag a security guy with the mic have a nice dinner and then get back here."

"Got it," Rielle confirmed as she picked up her purse and headed out the door.

Hacker and healer waited impatiently for Rielle to return. Henry's concern seemed to be of the brotherly type. It was clear that the two of them had formed a bond over the last several days. Xero guessed it was due in part, to Henry's desire to save Rielle from a fate worse than death-- life with Xero.

The two made a concentrated effort that evening to stay out of each other's way which was made difficult by Rielle's insistence that Henry keep an eye on his patient. Somewhat awkwardly he sat down in a chair off to the side of the work table and tried to be as unobtrusive as possible while Xero fidgeted with one stack of printed papers than another. The hours droned on and Henry was certain he'd go crazy in the edgy silence.

"I'm sure she's fine," he finally said, his voice snapping the quiet like the breaking of a dry twig.

"She can take care of herself," Xero agreed doing her best to sound indifferent. She tried to tell herself she could care less what happened to Rielle but knew she didn't. It was more than a desire to get laid. She reasoned that if she were that desperate, she could probably seduce Henry for that. No, something was up--something she couldn't put her finger on--but she decided she didn't care when she heard the sound of Henry's car returning to the house. Relief gave permission for her exhaustion to surface and Rielle had barely made it downstairs when the hacker's eyes began to flutter closed.

"Hi guys, mission accomplished," Rielle announced cheerfully. "Bagged Helms himself, and the eggplant was wonderful."

"Tell me in the morning," Xero muttered and slumped over, sound asleep at the work table.

"This isn't funny," Xero shouted as she gripped the ship's railing, wishing she had something substantial in her stomach to discharge. She bated dry heaves.

"Seasickness sucks, doesn't it?" Janice commented.

Xero turned around, her eyes glaring into those of the archeologist. "I've been meaning to ask you, how did you die? Please tell me your girlfriend got fed up and did you in with a chain saw."

"You've been watching too many old movies," Mel said soothingly from her position at Janice's side. Both women were leaning against the ships railing to Xero's left, seemingly unaffected by the rocking of the ancient Greek war ship.

"Mel and I were killed in a car accident. I was in my eighties, Mel was ninety-two." Janice supplied with a smile.

"Driver of a truck fell asleep at the wheel and ran into the car taking us home from one of Janice's archaeology conferences," Mel said, looking at her companion lovingly. Her face beamed with pride.

Janice smile bashfully. "We were, how do you put it? Unsubbed instantly. But at least we went together."

Both women exchanged a look that had Xero over the railing with dry heaves once more.

"Where are we going?" the hacker asked when she was able to stand.

"To a sea side village called Neopolitis," Janice replied, moving to a barrel of fresh water and filling a mug for the seasick woman.

Xero accepted the mug gratefully, downing its contents and wiping her mouth on her sleeve. To her surprise, she was wearing a green and black checked flannel shirt over her white t-shirt. She'd never seen the shirt before, but felt comfortable in it none the less.

"The folks of Neopolitis made a big mistake," Janice continued, adjusting the hat she wore. "They sided with Vanilis in a dispute with Amphhipolis. Not a smart thing to do with Xena around."

As if on cue, a figure emerged from below decks. Xena was dressed more colorfully than her crew, in bright blue billowing pants and armor decorated in gold coin.

"Interesting wardrobe choice," Xero muttered. "Did she miss the cut for 'I Dream Of Jeannie'?"

"You're one to talk, 'Lumber Jill'," the archeologist shot back with a grin, looking pointedly at the flannel

shirt.

Xena shrugged out of her robes and waited for the archer to take his position across the deck from her. At her nod, he drew an arrow from his quiver, knocked it to the string, took aim, and fired. Xena lunged out of the way, catching the shaft before it imbedded itself in the cabin door behind her.

"Nice catch," Xero said approvingly.

"She's still pretty rough," Mel amended. "In time, she won't have to lunge out of the way. She's only catching about ninety percent of the arrows now, but she'll catch on."

"Mel, you're such a perfectionist," Janice scolded. The archaeologist fished into her pocket and extracted a small cigar, offering it to Xero who declined. After striking a match on the metal band of the water barrel, she lit the cigar and puffed thoughtfully as they watched the Xena go through her workout. By the time she finished, the doomed village of Neopolitis was clearly in view.

The raid didn't last long. Storage buildings were hit with flaming arrows before the ship even docked. Like a tide, the men from the war ship surged onto land, swords gleaming, frightening the villagers into submission. Before long, the villagers were on their knees in the town square as the treasury was brought to Xena. A heavy trunk loaded with dinars and precious jewels was dumped at her feet, carried by the village elders. She gave a short speech, explaining just why the night had come crashing down on them with vengeance. She didn't hide her pride that the enemies of Amphipolis always paid, either with their gold or with their lives.

The crew made its way back to the warship, a prisoner in tow. "Who's the bob in the leather skirt?" Xero asked with interest, looking to Janice.

The archeologist just smiled and before long the man announced his identity with some pride, not cowed by Xena's threatening presence. Xero's jaw dropped.

"That's Caesar?" she stammered. "I thought he'd be taller."

Janice, Mel, and Xero followed the others back onboard as they set sail, and again, time shifted. Activity on deck exploded in the morning light as a stowaway was discovered. Xero whistled approvingly at the fight that ensued, clearly impressed by the small woman's proficiency. Janice grinned, overhearing hacker mutter "nice piece of work."

The three women followed Xena below decks where she began her study of pressure points, anxious to learn all she could from the diminutive fighter who'd nearly bested her crew. Janice and Mel noticed Xero watching with interest, casually touching spots on her own neck as they were explained. Warlord and slave worked together for several hours, developing a form of communication based on sign language and the slave's limited understanding of Greek. When Xena called a halt to her lessons, she casually mentioned plans to see Caesar later. At the sound of the Roman's name, the slave's demeanor changed. Xena seemed slightly puzzled by the behavior, but appeared unconcerned.

"What's she doing?" Xero demanded when Xena headed up the stairs from the cargo hold. "The pressure point chick is practically throwing herself at her!"

"Xena's not... um... in tune with that just yet," Janice explained feebly.

"You've gotta be kidding," Xero wondered, looking after the warrior. "You'd think betrayal by Petracles would have taught her something."

"Taught her what, Xero?" Janice challenged. "Surely you of all people aren't saying women are more trustworthy than men?" The archeologist shook her head sadly. "A woman can betray you as readily as a man."

Mel moved to stand next to her lover and draped a comforting arm around the smaller woman's shoulders. "Janice, honey, we've gone over this a hundred times. You know Gabrielle had her reasons for what she did."

"What are you talking about?" Xero interrupted.

"Gabrielle betrayed Xena is what I'm talking about," Janice replied bitterly.

The hacker's eyes went wide as she put the pieces together. "When all this shit started you said I am Xena. Rielle's insisting that she is Gabrielle. Now you're telling me that Gabrielle betrayed Xena. So what you're really asking me to do is help the sycoph who betrayed me in another life?"

"Don't get indignant about this," Janice warned. "You don't know the whole story and are in absolutely no position to offer any opinion on this whatsoever."

"That's a bit strong, Janice," Mel countered. Turning to the hacker, she smiled kindly. "What my love seems to forget is that the 'unfortunate incident' came at a very difficult time in Gabrielle's life. She was someone who revered life above everything else and saw herself as a peacemaker."

"Terrific," Xero muttered.

“Anyway,” the Southerner continued with a disapproving look, “Xena dragged them both off to Britannia to settle an old grudge, and Gabrielle was forced to kill someone in self defense. She was devastated, struggling to...” Mel paused, at a loss for words to convey the depths of the bard’s anguish.

“She wandered amid the ruins of her decimated psyche. To use an archeological metaphor,” Janice supplied, a touch sarcastically.

“Janice, be nice,” Mel warned. “It didn’t help matters any when that fire god Daybok went and got her in a family way and she had to give birth to a demon on top of everything.” Xero’s jaw dropped and she sat down heavily on a nearby crate. “As I was saying,” Mel continued more gently, “to make matters worse, just after all that, Xena had to pay an old debt that she owed to her mentor and didn’t take the time to explain the whole situation to Gabrielle.”

“Mel, you and I both know that talking wasn’t Xena’s strong suit,” Janice countered. “Hell, even Gabrielle knew it.”

“Look, the last thing I’m going to do is break up a fight between you two,” Xero warned, head still reeling. “So I suggest you drop it. Mel, if you’d just tell me what happened...”

The Southerner nodded and continued. “Xena travelled to C’hin, or China as we know it, to make good on her promise. Gabrielle betrayed her and warned the man Xena was supposed to kill, the Emperor himself. She trusted the Emperor who was a lying bast...a, um, not a very nice man,” Mel corrected herself, nervously adjusting her glasses. “When she realized the mistake she’d made, she was devastated. Ultimately, she worked it out with Xena, and if Xena didn’t hold a grudge against Gabrielle, I don’t see why anyone else should.” The last was said with a pointed glare at the archeologist.

“I’m not holding grudges,” Janice said defensively. “I was simply pointing out to our charge here that women are not by virtue of their ovaries any more trustworthy than men, particularly seeing as how some of them can later lie to you about throwing Demon Baby off the cliff and then...”

“Janice,” Mel drawled sweetly and with very little warmth. “I think that when it was over and all the smoke cleared, both of them were very hurt, both forgave each other, both had lost children...”

“Children?” Xero mumbled, still holding her head.

“Yes, but certain children had more to do with...” the archaeologist was replying, not even bothering to disguise her mounting irritation.

“Okay, okay,” Xero broke in hastily. “So we can all agree that Xena had trouble with lovers all around? Is that it?” Janice and Mel looked guiltily at each other. Clearly, they wanted to object to the statement, but couldn’t. “Fine, you two stay down here and work out your issues, I’m going back up deck and hurl some more.”

Xero’s perception of time shifted. While it didn’t feel like much time had passed at all, inwardly she knew it had been weeks. Caesar was traded for ransom and the slave girl freed from her bonds. She and Xena spent many hours above deck sparring. Time was spent below deck as well, but that time was reserved for a more detailed study of pressure points. Xena learned a few words of Gaelic and the slave learned the meaning of many of the warrior’s words, although she couldn’t put them together for herself. The hacker watched with obvious frustration as the Egyptian made overtures to the Greek woman, failing with each attempt.

“You didn’t tell me that Xena was the densest woman alive,” she muttered at one point within Janice Covington’s earshot.

“Funny,” the archeologist shot back. “I thought Rielle said that about you.”

With a frown, the hacker turned her attention along with Xena to the man in the crow’s nest, alerting those on deck to an approaching ship bearing Caesar’s standard. The slave did her best to warn Xena of the danger, but the warrior was adamant.

“It’ll be alright,” Xena assured the slave. “He’s my friend.”

“What kind of euphemism is that?” Xero demanded of the warrior that could not hear her.

“For all her complexities, Xena is at times frighteningly simple,” Janice explained. “She had a number of friends through her life, some more intimate than others, but she was fiercely loyal to all of them.”

“To be honest,” Mel countered with an apologetic smile, “if she introduced someone as a ‘friend’, you could bet she was sleeping with them.”

With barely controlled rage, Xero watched Caesar betray of Xena and her crew. Those that weren’t killed on sight were taken to the beach where they were crucified. “I don’t see Darnelle,” the hacker remarked, looking at the

faces of those dying on crosses.

Janice shook her head. "He couldn't stand the sea. He and Xena parted ways after Poteidaia, spent his time as a first class gladiator. It wasn't until years later that he was reacquainted with her. Marcus left then too. She stopped by to visit him from time to time, being a 'friend' and all. She worked a few jobs with him, then had him in her army for a time after her 'rebirth'."

"Rebirth?" Xero asked the trio neared the last cross.

Her expression pained and static, the hacker watched as the last cross was raised. She closed her eyes briefly at the agony inflicted when the main beam slammed home. With each swing of large sledge hammers, the warrior winced. Xero winced with her as if she felt the searing pain as well.

"Crucifixion is such a messy way to die," Janice explained, holding Mel's hand as the Southerner turned away. "It's designed to kill you slowly, by asphyxiation. Your upper body can't support the weight of your lower body and it strangles you. The whole leg breaking routine was a Roman idea of mercy. It usually speeded up the dying process. I think the apostle Paul was nuts for requesting the procedure upside down."

Xero didn't hear the archaeologist's words. Her whole being was focused on the blue eyes that glared down at Caesar in defiance. Inwardly, she knew better. Watching Xena's face she could see things that the Roman couldn't--the building fear, the agony, the rage at his betrayal. Xena was a rope slowly snapping, each strand that frayed separating her a little further from herself, closer to a black void.

The hacker heard as well as felt the crack of shinbones and the tearing of muscles as the heavy hammer slammed into the warrior's legs. Only one strand remained, one small thread that kept Xena connected to the child who grew up in Amphipolis. Xero sank to her knees and cried in pain and anguish as she realized the inevitable.

It was only a matter of time before the last thread was severed, a thread named M'lila.

*And it's alright though we worry and fuss
we can't get over the hump can't get over us
It seems easier to push than to let go and trust
But it's alright
— Emily Sailers*

Chapter 5: System Crashes

"Take it easy," Rielle's voice soothed. "You're okay, it's just a dream."

Xero blinked, then realized she was shaking. Her eyes quickly adjusting to the darkness, she realized she was back in her cot, dressed in her sweats, covered by a thin blanket. "I'm fine," she replied with an assurance she didn't feel. She was curled almost in a ball, her head and shoulders resting in the syscop's lap. While the hacker wasn't completely happy about the body language of the arrangement, she wasn't anxious for the smaller woman to release her any time soon.

"I know you're fine," Rielle echoed gently. "You've had a shock, that's all." The syscop was gently stroking the hacker's head, the tender touch keeping the larger woman still and quiet. "I found some pills in your toolbox," she continued. "How long have you had the habit?"

Xero chuckled. "They're mild uppers, Rielle, nothing major. I'm sure your marketing executive, Paula, uses the same stuff."

*"It's not *that* you use them, Xero. It's *why*." Rielle tightened her hold on the other woman slightly to keep her from bolting. "I'm not stupid. You didn't have to work night and day. You made damn good money on the jobs you did, and you had help. You took the pills to keep from dreaming, didn't you?"*

"What of it?" Xero replied in a small voice. "I'm dreaming now, aren't I?"

"Yes, yes you are," Rielle affirmed gently. The pride in her voice was evident. Xero would have groaned out loud if she'd had the energy. Instead she lay there, letting the smaller woman comfort her. The syscop didn't ask what the dream had been about and Xero wondered if she knew.

Deciding not to offer the details unless pressed, the hacker remained motionless, absorbing the kindness offered. In time she drifted close enough to unconsciousness that Rielle moved her head from her lap to a more comfortable position on the cot. She took a moment to adjust the outlaw's arms and legs, careful to keep healthy blood circulation in the limbs. When she finished, she positioned herself next to Xero, sitting upright, leaning against the wall. Gently, her hand continued to stroke the hacker's dark hair.

"You don't have to be this nice," Xero mumbled sleepily.

Rielle smiled, "I know," she replied, and continued with her tender ministrations.

"I'll never... get to sleep this way," Xero muttered, rolling on to her side and moving a bit closer to the syscop. She draped one arm over the syscop's right thigh as if the smaller woman's leg was a teddy bear.

"Maybe not," Rielle allowed, beaming. "But I'll take my chances," she finished, echoed by the soft snoring of her sleeping companion.

"Rise and shine sleepyhead, rise and shine." The words assaulted Xero's mind like the din of a radio alarm clock set to a language she didn't understand.

"I'll rise," she groaned, "but shining is out of the question." The words sounded familiar to the hacker's own ears but she felt a little odd saying them. Fortunately, she was distracted by an intense pain emanating from her lower legs. "What the fuck is wrong with my shins," she demanded, throwing back the blanket.

Rielle was instantly at her side, pulling up one leg of the sweatpants to the hacker's knee. Unable to see anything visibly wrong with the leg she squeezed Xero's arm reassuringly. "I'm sure it's nothing, but I'll go get Henry just in case."

She headed up the stairs and returned shortly thereafter with a groggy Henry in tow. He was dressed in t-shirt and boxers, clearly having just been thoroughly and relentlessly woken up. "What are you whining about?" he grumbled sleepily.

Like an animal that you should have killed with the first shot, Xero's eyes narrowed as Henry kneeled before her and examined her legs. "Those needles you've been sticking me with, I think they did something to my legs. They're killing me."

He made a few careful prods, extracting a pained wince from Xero with each touch. Finally, he sat back on his haunches and looked the hacker squarely in the eye. "Xero, you're actually right for a change. The needles did their work. I'm happy to report that you've got the feeling back in your lower legs."

"Feeling?!" Xero demanded. "Try excruciating pain."

"It'll pass," the healer assured her. "Go for a swim—it'll help the circulation and keep your mind off the pain." Xero glared at him and he silenced her with a wave of his hand. "Before you argue, for no good reason other than you're argumentative by nature, let me explain something. When a dam breaks, the water doesn't flow out at a nice leisurely pace. It rushes out destroying anything still in its path. Why do people end up in therapy? They shut down parts of themselves, for whatever reason, and then, in time, they lose it and see a shrink to control the flood. Same thing is happening to your legs."

"My legs need a shrink?" Xero demanded sarcastically.

"Your legs among other things," the healer grinned back. "Let's just say they're feeling again, and I hope to God I'm not around should the rest of you decide to follow suit. As long as you work the muscles, the pain will lessen and you'll get your coordination back."

"Well, I'm not getting back in that freezing pond," the hacker maintained.

Henry shrugged. "Fine. I don't care whether you legs mend or not." Rielle glared at him sharply and his manner softened somewhat. "Look, why don't you start with walking? I've got some braces to help you get started. The more you use your legs, the quicker the pain will subside. If you don't, you can seriously fuck yourself up."

When the healer headed back upstairs, Xero hoped it was for good. To her dismay, he returned with two aluminum leg braces and a pair of crutches. He stayed long enough to get the

braces attached and crutches properly fitted before excusing himself under the pretense of getting food.

With a sense of resignation, Xero looked across the sunny expanse of land behind Henry's house. The afternoon sun glinted off the still waters of the pond. The air was comfortable and crisp. By all accounts, it had to be classified a beautiful day. Putting such thoughts aside, the hacker grabbed the crutches and prepared for battle. Attached to her forearms, the aluminum crutches had padded grip to clutch while balancing her body. Supporting her weight with her arms and upper body, she could feel just how withered she'd become over the last few days.

"So how did things go last night?" she asked after taking her first tentative step into the springy soil.

"With Helms?" Rielle clarified, keeping a wary eye on her companion's progress. She resisted the urge to assist the hacker and watched as the taller woman struggled to move one leg in front of the other. Keeping her voice light, she tried to distract the outlaw from the pain she was obviously feeling. "Went off without a hitch. I got up from my seat just as he passed my table and bumped into him. Deetjun's has a very cozy dining room. Henry and I stayed up and listened to the broadcast. Oh, and we recorded it for you since you kinda passed out."

Xero expelled a controlled breath of air. Frustrated at the exertion required for three steps, she nodded and shifted her leg for step number four. "Did he say anything interesting?"

"Well, he joked with his security about which mistress he'd spend the night with."

Xero snorted. "Let me guess, was it Buffy or Walter?"

The syscop smiled. "Actually the bets were running Microsoft, with Fox and Telleride tying for second. I get the impression that Helms is too busy deal making to worry about more carnal pleasures."

Pausing thoughtfully, Xero considered the options. "A computer company trying to make it back to the big-time, the number one network, and an arms manufacturer. Interesting bedmates. So I take it he was heading up north?"

Rielle nodded. "No, south. Apparently he's going to meet with Microsoft at a Santa Barbara ranch. When he got into the car, he made some crack about having a BBQ in the President's back yard."

"President Taborn has a house in Santa Barbara. I wouldn't be surprised if she didn't spend a few days there, between funerals." The hacker's breathing grew labored, taxed by the effort of willing her pained legs into motion. Rielle sympathized, but didn't comment. She doubted the hacker would have appreciated any effort to help.

"The President made a statement yesterday on the news. Clearly she's a bit broken up; some of her good friends, not to mention political allies, are dropping like flies. She's cautioning everyone to stay away from their computers unless absolutely necessary. A special task force is being assembled to look into the problem. Taborn suggested several computer gurus and got some flack for trying to include some Hollywood people. Congress wanted to add committee members representing everything from the dairy council to the committee on foreign affairs."

The hacker stopped abruptly, her eyebrows furrowed in thought. Slowly, a look of comprehension eased across her sculpted features and she smiled knowingly.

"What is it?" Rielle prompted.

"Come on," Xero replied, heading for the house once more. Back at the desk she began rifling through the stack of papers. "President Taborn isn't stupid," the hacker said in a rush as she looked through her notes. "Now, what is it we know for sure? Something in the network is unsubbing people, and we know there's a pattern to who's been unsubbed. Now we hear that she isn't turning to just government goons to fix this. If Taborn's looking for outsiders—like Hollywood—then she must suspect some government agency has a hand in this."

"The military?" Rielle asked. "They have the most powerful computers. And Helms is a big supporter."

"Maybe," the hacker allowed with a smile. "And what could fight that? What industry is bigger than the military, with more money... and more powerful computers?"

Rielle thought a moment before her eyes snapped up in understanding. “Entertainment,” she whispered.

Xero grinned broadly. “The President is suspicious of her own people and wants to bring in the celluloid thugs to help clean house. She can’t turn to Congress because he’s got a foothold there. Congress hates Hollywood already either for destroying modern civilization, or pointing out that our civilization needs some work. Who better to trust to do some effective troubleshooting?”

“It still doesn’t make sense though,” Rielle insisted. “While the Entertainment giants might have the biggest guns in terms of computing capability, they don’t have any love for the government. Why would they help?”

“They won’t,” Xero agreed. “And it’s a shame because Helms has said he’s running for office and he *hates* Hollywood. But it isn’t just because they’re greedy pigs and want to sit back while everything falls apart around them. Hollywood isn’t designed to do anything quickly, unless it’s to cash in on something tragic, even then it takes a ton of people to do it.”

“So why are you smiling?” Rielle finally asked, completely confused. “Taborn will go to them for help but they won’t be able to...”

“Because if you add hackers into the mix of Hollywood computing firepower, suddenly you’ve got a force that can do very big things, very quickly,” Xero said with a smirk. Rielle sat there silent, staring at the familiar gleam that had suddenly come to a pair of sparkling blue eyes.

The black limousine headed south down highway one, its lone occupant in the back seat, oblivious to the breathtaking stretch of ocean outside the passenger window. Hitting a button on his remote to activate the intercom, Jasper Helms addressed the driver.

“When do we reach Santa Barbara?”

“In three hours, forty-eight minutes, Senator Helms,” the driver replied politely.

Absently, Helms nodded and touched another button on his remote to activate the monitor set into the command console of the car and watched the news with only half his attention. The grisly images of charred remains in story after story no longer gave him the sense of a job well done. While they were still political enemies and hackers for the most part, and therefore deserving of such a fate, he’d seen too much death in the past few days to have it really mean anything anymore. In a world populated by short attention spans, Jasper Helms was a walking attention deficit.

Restless and edgy, he looked for some distraction on the long ride to his next meeting. That was all his life was of late—meetings and conquests and watching charred bodies on the news.

Punching a seldom used number into his mobie unit, he waited impatiently for an answer.

“Yes?” a female voice answered.

“Any sign of Xero?” Helms didn’t bother to announce himself. The hacker knew damn well who he was and it was only due to his foresight she’d not met the same fate as many of her colleagues.

“No, Senator,” she replied, sounding as edgy as he felt. “I heard she left just after Bat’s wake. No one knows where she went. I’ve got my sources looking into it. I’m sure I can find her, I just need more time.”

“Time, my dear, is one thing you’ve got precious little of. Why don’t you go have a look ‘round Xero’s place. See if you can dig up anything there.”

“Okay,” the voice answered a bit dubiously. “I’ll need some time to make my way there unobserved. There’s been a lot of action at The ‘Horn and activity around Xero’s place. It’ll have to look natural.”

“Take a day or two if you need it, but do something to get me that hacker!” Annoyed he cut the connection to the call, filling the limo with silence once again. It was possible that his contact had begun to fear for her own safety. Nervous traitors weren’t very good allies. Still not satisfied, he placed another call.

“Yes, Senator,” a gravely male voice intoned from the private line to his office.

“I have some sanitation work for you, Douglas. A young woman will be heading toward the

missing hacker's apartment. She should show in the next couple of days."

"I'll take care of it," the voice replied.

Helm's clicked off his mobile unit, gazing out the car window. The morning was looking up after all.

Hours later, both women were sitting on the floor of Henry's workroom, the gutted computer remains strewn around them. "You really did a number on the system," the hacker commented dismally as she inspected several cracked circuit boards for useable parts.

"You'd rather I let you fry?" Rielle inquired as she removed the dented casing from a brain box. "I told you, the system's a loss. It's just as well. Logging on will kill you at this point."

"We need to find some way to hook into the 'horn node,'" Xero explained. "We need database access if we're going to get a comprehensive list of the unsubbed. I should also give them a heads up to start working on getting a message to the President."

"Don't even tell me hackers have that kind of access," Rielle demanded.

Xero only winked. "Afraid you'll be out of a job? Relax. Under ordinary circumstances we'd be shot on sight. But if President Taborn wants to talk to Entertainment, the chances are she might want to talk to us. But we can't get the word out unless we can get to the 'Horn node.'" With a frustrated grunt, she tossed another brain box aside. "Shit, none of this stuff is any good."

Rielle let out a frustrated sigh and glanced at her watch. They'd been at it for some time. She'd noticed her companion shift uncomfortably on the floor more than once and could only imagine the pain the hacker was hiding.

"Come on, Xero," she offered casually. "Let's go for a swim."

Xero lifted only her eyes from the hardware she was holding. "I told you already, I *don't* swim."

"And I told you I could teach you. Besides, it isn't like we're making any progress. The walk might do us both some good." Rielle kept her voice casual but studied her companion carefully. Unpredictable and volatile... She wasn't sure what the hacker's reaction would be.

Xero's eyes narrowed slightly and she looked past Rielle to the pond beyond the house. "It's fifty feet from here to the pond. What kind of 'walk' is that?" As an afterthought, she looked at the sky. Noting that it was fast approaching dusk, she relaxed visibly.

"There's another spot Henry told me about, only a short hike away. It'd probably be good for your legs to stretch them." With a wicked grin she added, "Unless you're afraid, of course. Come on, I *dare* you". Arms crossed at her chest, Rielle MacGab was the picture of confidence and challenge. Her grin didn't even falter as the hacker's eyebrow raised dangerously. Oh yeah, she'd hit a nerve.

"Fine," Xero growled. "We swim."

The syscop headed upstairs with a smile and returned a few moments later, carrying a small backpack slung over one shoulder.

Xero nodded toward the glass door as she stood, settling herself onto the crutches. "Lead on."

"Look at the bright side. Henry said the water isn't freezing--it's part of a hot spring," Rielle commented as they made their way along.

Xero rolled her eyes. "Great, now I get to collect parasites as well as drown." Relying on her crutches for support, she followed the syscop down the narrow trail that extended from the back of the healer's property. Rielle stopped at several points to take in the spectacular views of the ocean and rock formations below. As the sun sank below the expanse of water, the horizon took on an eerie blood red glow. From the corner of her eye, Rielle watch Xero lick her lips nervously. The hacker was as awed by the sight as she was. After several failed attempts at conversation, she sighed in frustration at her limited success. It was hard for her to determine if Xero was quiet because she was miserable or really that antisocial. Just like Xena.

"How are the legs feeling?" she tried one more time as they left the trail at the landmark

Henry had described.

“Like I’m wading knee deep in razor blades,” Xero replied, her voice neutral.

Rielle was genuinely worried. “I’m really sorry, Xero. Henry was certain you’d start to feel immediate improvement once you started using them.”

“Rielle,” the hacker assured her with a smile. “It *is* an improvement.”

With a relieved sigh, the syscop led Xero onto a rock outcrop that jutted over a long narrow expanse of water. “Here we are, just where Henry said it would be.” The hacker grunted noncommittally and sat down, so far the only indication that the half mile hike had been taxing. Rielle continued to explore and filling the silence with the details she’d learned. “Henry said that this pool was formed in the Great Quake of ’17 when all the geothermal activity thrust up closer to the surface.”

“Oh goodie,” the hacker grumbled.

Rielle smiled and extracted a few things from her pack. She tossed Xero a towel and a flashlight to strap to her wrist. She also picked up a small bottle and carefully removed the top. “These drops will take care of those parasites you’re worried about, if there even are any.” Demonstrating, she tilted her head back, put a drop in each eye, nostril, and ear. Finally, she squeezed the bottle and several drops landed on her extended tongue.

“Why are you so into water?” Xero asked with a baffled expression. “It seems like a lot of work for nothing.”

“Oh come on, don’t tell me you didn’t enjoy hot baths as a kid?” Rielle replied handing her the bottle.

The hacker’s expression didn’t change. “I’ve never had a bath. Orphanages have spray showers.”

Embarrassed, Rielle looked away, letting her gaze drift over steaming pool of water. “I’m sorry, Xero. I forgot. What house did you grow up in?”

The hacker tilted her head back and let a droplet fall into her left eye. “Shit, that stings,” she grumbled. After a shrug, she concentrated on the right. “I did time in seven different houses. I left the houses all together when I was thirteen.”

Rielle’s jaw dropped as Henry’s dismal assessment of the hacker resurfaced in her memory. “You’ve been on your own that long?”

Xero shrugged again. “Call it my version of summer camp.”

“So how did you fall into hacking?” the syscop asked gently.

Her dark companion handed the bottle back with a suspicious glare. “What does it matter?”

“I’m just trying to make small talk, give me a break,” Rielle replied. “You’d think you’d never had a civil conversation before.” After strapping the small flashlight to her own wrist, she knelt in front of the hacker. “Can I help you get these braces off? Or are you going to snap at me if I try?”

“You can help,” Xero answered quietly. “Thank you.”

“See, I knew you had manners,” the syscop chuckled.

“Don’t push it, Rielle.”

Once braces and clothes had been discarded, Rielle helped Xero maneuver over the smooth rocks to the steaming pool. It was narrower but longer than the pond in Henry’s back yard. Sloping down gently, the water only reached the hacker’s waist by the middle of the pool.

“Ohhh, this is wonderful,” Rielle purred as she immediately submerged herself and shoved off into a back stroke.

“Yeah, nice,” her companion grumbled uncomfortably.

With the air temperature dropping, Xero was faced with the fact that being in the water was considerably more comfortable than being out of it. And the pain in her legs eased up a little as the water supported her weight. Aside from the fact that it was *water*, it wasn’t half bad.

Rielle returned to Xero’s side and stood. Wading carefully, she pointed out where the steep drops were. “As long as we stay around here, you can put your feet down any time you’d like and you’ll be standing.”

Xero looked dubiously at the water. “Anything else in here but us?”

Flicking on the flashlight, Rielle scanned the pool. "There might be some fish. Henry says he swims here all the time. He tests the water regularly and it's clean. He's even seen animals on the banks from time to time."

"More shades of summer camp?" the hacker asked, using her own flashlight to illuminate her immediate surroundings.

"Is that so bad?" Rielle challenged gently, returning to the hacker's side once more.

Xero shrugged. "No. Not bad, just different."

"If it's any consolation, I taught swimming when I worked there. Didn't lose a single camper in the three years I did it." The hacker nodded but didn't comment. "The most important thing you have to do is relax. Try not to tense up. You float much better when you're relaxed. Get tense and you'll sink like a rock."

"That's comforting."

Rielle laughed at Xero's gruffness and moved behind her. "Ease yourself into the water, let me hold you up. We're just going to have you float on your back. I'll have your shoulders and you'll be able to breathe. Got it?"

The hacker began to comply and Rielle eased her hands onto strong shoulders. Muscles taut as bowstrings were her first indication at how nervous her companion truly was. "So why don't you tell me when you started hacking? Or are you afraid I'll find you that you haven't been at it as long as your rap sheet states?"

Xero's body tensed once more as her feet left the bottom of the pool. Focusing on Rielle's voice, drifting to her ears from somewhere above her head. "My record is pretty accurate. You know a better way for a thirteen year old to make a living?"

"A thirteen year old shouldn't *have* to earn a living," Rielle replied emphatically.

"Truly spoken by someone who hasn't done any time in the 'houses'." Unbidden memories surfaced, a collage of voices and images flickering through her mind, then vanishing. Reprimand, embarrassment, and conflict all jostled for primary attention. By force of will and habit, Xero closed the door and continued with her narrative. "I considered dealing black market plague drugs, but I was ten at the time and it's hard to make those types of connections. I started running parts for some local hackers instead. Three years of that and I was ready to work on my own."

"I'm sure you could have gone to college?" Rielle challenged as she supported the hacker's body in the warm water.

"A half million in debt just for starters? I don't think so. Besides...there were a few people I needed to settle a score with. Hacking let me do it." With a satisfied grin she remembered the look on the headmaster's face as he was taken to prison, a broken man. "I suppose you went to college?" the hacker asked trying desperately not to think about the water.

Rielle cleared her throat before answering. "Yeah, I did," she answered tightly. Xero opened her eyes to the pained expression gazing down at her from above.

"I thought college was a good thing," Xero remarked mildly.

"My dad was a scientist. He worked for a bio-corp. His company paid for my education when he died." Rielle's words were flat, numb, as if she were prepared for any reaction and didn't care what it was.

Xero's feet shot to the bottom of the pool and she stood in the shallow water, looking down in surprise at her companion. "Your dad was a Plague-Bearer? He did rainforest work?"

The syscop nodded. "Yeah. He was looking for medical cures and was part of the team that brought the Red Death home to America. That's why I got the education, the house, the cushy job. Archive Corp. is covering their tracks."

Xero shrugged, easing back into the water once more. "Don't be so hard on yourself. They should pay. That doesn't mean your skills aren't top notch anyways. Hell, you tapped me online after all."

Rielle stared at her, dumbfounded. "How can you say that? My father is responsible for the death of *millions* of people. Maybe even your parents!"

"Considering I'm a criminal, I have a hard time being too concerned about any one else's

track record. Sure, I think what the bio-companies did was stupid. Stupid and arrogant. But that isn't your fault. Explains why you're such a do-gooder though," she added with a wink.

"Aside from trying to bring you in, I can't say I've done much do-gooding. Yeah, I've caught a fair share of hackers, but I've done plenty I'm not proud of too." As the syscop spoke, she slowly moved away from the hacker's shoulders, letting the larger woman float on her own.

"Speaking of mistakes, why did you marry Paula?" Xero teased as she struggled to keep the panic out of her voice. After taking a couple of deep breaths, she again relaxed in the water.

"What makes you think I was talking about Paula?"

Xero shrugged, then struggled a moment to regain her balance. Giving up she stood and looked down at the syscop, water streaming off of her body. "Because I can tell you're not in love with her. I doubt you ever were. She isn't what you're looking for."

Rielle turned away, the words hitting too close to home. "Maybe so," she said tightly. "But people make choices. Sometimes they choose to make do when what they want eludes them...or when they don't even know what it is they want." With a sad shake of her head she smiled. "This isn't the first time it's happened to me. Gabrielle herself married the wrong guy. She didn't have to live with the mistake of marriage for long though since Callisto killed him the next day. Instead she had to live with the guilt of his death for the rest of her life."

"From the looks of it, I'd say that guilt lasted longer than one lifetime."

Rielle couldn't help but smile. "Stop being so nice or I won't recognize you. Get back in the water and let's teach you to swim. I'm going to do this, even if it kills you."

Xero was an apt, if stubborn student. She showed promise though, and in time she mastered the rudimentary skills of swimming. While she lacked the graceful glide of Rielle moving through the water. She could manage getting from one length of the swimming hole to the other, and that was a victory.

When the moon was directly overhead, they decided to head back. Rielle was aware of Xero's eyes on her body as she towed off. Grateful for the darkness that surrounded them, she was relieved the blush on her cheeks couldn't be seen. "So did they hurt?" she asked, handing the hacker her sweatshirt.

"What? These?" Xero asked glancing down at her breasts. "Sure. But hey, lots of things hurt."

"Got anything else pierced?" the syscop asked, her curiosity getting the better of her.

"Wanna find out?" Xero asked with a steady gaze.

"I just asked," Rielle shot back defensively.

"As did I," the hacker replied.

As they made their way up the trail to Henry's house, Rielle decided to change the subject. "Have you thought that boosting the power and range of your mobie might let you get a crude message to the 'horn node'?"

"Sure, I've thought of it," Xero allowed. "But we don't have the parts I'd need for that kind of converter."

"It's no big deal. I can take Henry's car when we get back to the house, head up to Carmel. A couple of scramblers, a power cel, and adaptor can't be that hard to find."

Xero grinned broadly. "So the syscop knows how to make a beacon. Nicely done. I suppose you know a vendor as well?"

"No," Rielle allowed. "But I'm sure Henry would tell me where to go at this time of night. Trust me, he wants us to figure this out and get the hell out of his house."

"Good. Then I'll head out when we get back."

"You'll do nothing of the kind," Rielle shot back fiercely. "Your credit isn't any good, you're dead-- remember? That kind of cash transaction raises suspicion and we can't risk it. Let me get the parts, and you can rig up the beacon when I get back."

"Fine, have it your way," the hacker chuckled as she followed her companion up the dark

trail.

It was near dawn when Henry descended the stairs to the work room. Xero was still up. She appeared to be working, but he knew better. He watched a moment as she shuffled papers, read a few lines, then shuffled them again. She was waiting up for Rielle. With a resigned sigh, he coughed and made his presence known. The look on his face brought Xero instantly to her feet.

“What happened?” she demanded.

“I got a call from a friend in Carmel,” he explained. “There was an...incident at the place where Rielle went to get parts. She’s been picked up.”

“What the fuck do you mean ‘picked up!’” Instantly, she was charging towards the stairs. Fortunately for Henry, she was only able to charge at approximately half speed. The healer quickly backed up, putting his arms out to keep the enraged hacker at a distance.

“I don’t know, okay? Some woman showed up with a medical carrier and four orderlies.”

“What woman?” Xero demanded, enraged.

“Mike said she was tall, dark hair. I guess she’d been tracking Rielle. Since she brought medics, she probably took her to a medical facility.”

“That bitch,” Xero growled as she lunged for her mobie. Heedless of the dangers of traced calls, she punched in a private code. “Shadow? This is Xero. I don’t have time to explain. I need everything you’ve got on some chick named Paula. She works for Archive Corporation in Marketing. She was on the American fencing team in ‘36. Yeah, it’s related. Listen, I just need to find her. Call me on the mobie when you’ve got her. I’m on my way back.”

Tossing the hand held unit aside, she was about to turn but froze. Henry had jabbed her in the neck, squarely hitting a nerve. She felt her knees go weak as he eased her to the sleeping mat once more.

“You’re not leaving right now, Xero,” he explained. “Rielle would have my head. Rest first, have some food in the morning, and then I’ll let you go. You can’t do anything for her tonight anyway.”

“You bastard,” she seethed as her vision began to swim.

“Hey, remember that scene in *The Empire Strikes Back* where Luke insists on ignoring Yoda and ruins everything? Well, pretend I’m Yoda. Trust me, Xero, it’ll all work out. I promise.” His voice was gentle and his eyes knowing. The hacker felt her stomach sink.

“Wh...who does Rielle say y...you were?” she mumbled, fighting to keep her eyes open.

“Lyceus,” he answered with a chuckle.

A cold chill swept across the steppes, whipping Xero’s long black hair about her face and shoulders. She shoved her hands into the pockets of her leather jacket, noting once again she was wearing a checked flannel shirt. She noted with some relief that she had her boots this time. Looking around for either Janice or Mel, she caught a glimpse of the archeologist walking along the plains, distracted.

“I don’t have time for this,” the hacker announced by way of greeting. “Something’s happened to Rielle, I’ve gotta wake up.”

Janice Covington drew her eyes from the windswept plains to gaze up at the hacker. Eyes shining with unshed tears, she simply shrugged and returned her gaze to the plains. “So go,” she said quietly.

Xero stared at her in surprise. “What’s gotten into you?” she demanded. “I can’t just ‘go’, if that worked you think I’d still be here?”

“Then stay,” Janice supplied absently.

Worried, Xero shook Janice’s shoulder gently. “What’s the matter?”

Janice turned away to wipe her eyes on the sleeve of her brown leather jacket. “Nothing. I was just thinking about someone I miss, that’s all. She would have really loved these plains, ya know.”

“Mel?” Xero asked, puzzled.

With a nod, the archeologist pulled herself together. “Mel. Right. Follow me. She’s not far from here.”

Xero was going to press further, to see what memory had moved the gruff scientist to tears, but was distracted

by the field of bodies that littered the plains. "What the hell happened here?"

Janice studied the carnage for a moment before answering. "Two raiding parties descended on a caravan. Notice any difference in how these men were killed?"

Xero looked at the corpses her companion indicated. One warrior was stabbed through the chest, another had his head almost severed from his body. Attached by only a small strand of skin and muscle, the bones of the neck had been completely severed. "I'd say whoever killed this one is bad news. Takes a certain passion and rage to make this much of a mess."

"You're right," Janice agreed. "Xena killed him."

"She's changed, hasn't she?" Xero asked apprehensively.

Janice nodded sadly. "You know she has. When M'lila died in her arms something snapped. Everything since the battle for Amphipolis and Caesar's betrayal came to a head and she completely lost it. She made her way down the mountain to the home of a fisherman named Walsum and persuaded him to take her to Chin, trying to get away from the humiliation of what Caesar did."

"How'd she persuade him?" Xero asked as the two walked through the littered remains of the caravan.

Janice shrugged. "She killed his family. Granted, he didn't know she did it. She came in, took advantage of the situation and before you know it, he's on a one way trip to assassinhood."

"So this was as bad as she got?" the hacker asked, trying to keep the hopeful edge from her voice.

"Oh no," Janice replied, "it gets worse."

Xero caught the scent of horses and looked up to see two small groups of raiders facing each other. One broke off from each group and rode toward each other, stopping a short distance away from Janice and Xero. "I must know," the first raider said with a Slavic accent. "Who are you? I've never seen anyone fight the way you do." Xena removed her head covering, shaking her dark hair loose. "My God," Borias gasped.

"My name is Xena," she replied smoothly. "And I have a simple proposition. Join me and we will share the spoils from the caravan or you can fight me and I will kill you and all of your men."

It was clear from her expression and tone that she wasn't bluffing and Borias knew it. Given a free shot at life, he nodded graciously. "My name is Borias," he said. "And I would be honored to join forces with you."

Xena smiled and Borias shifted uncomfortably on his horse. "You're a smart man, Borias. I have need of smart men." After licking her lips dangerously, she kicked her horse into a trot and rejoined the group.

Borias watched her go, shaking his head. "Who would expect a demon of Tartarus to be so beautiful."

As they began to walk, Xero noticed a slight change in the landscape around her, the seasons shifting before her very eyes. Shortly they were again approaching a small group of mounted raiders.

"You said Xena was crippled, but she seems pretty comfortable on horseback," Xero observed, her curiosity getting the better of her as she (and the other raiders assembled) watched an intimate exchange between the warrior and Borias. "Never seen anyone get a quick fuck on horseback before."

Janice smiled, appreciating the hacker's directness and relieved that Mel wasn't around to wince and roll her eyes. "Horseback is the only place she's as capable as everyone else. Not that she does it exclusively on horseback, mind you, but I think she's trying to prove that she's as desirable as anyone. Evil people can be insecure too."

Xero looked around. "I don't see any other women here. It ain't like she's got competition." The hacker's observations were cut short as a messenger delivered word to Borias.

"Let him wait!" Xena demanded, pulling Borias close.

"Come on, Xena. We can do this anytime."

"Don't be so sure," she shot back.

With a laugh, he shoved Xena from his horse and tossed a crutch down to her. "I don't want you messing things up."

Xena watched him ride off. With a frustrated growl she climbed to her feet and hobbled back to her own horse. "Run to your master—puppy," she muttered.

Janice and Xero followed, and arrived back at camp just as a figure emerged from a litter. Introductions already underway, and both Xena and Xero studied Lao Ma intently.

"Please forgive my husband for sending his insignificant wife to handle such difficult affairs of state," Lao Ma said softly. "He's very ill."

"She's some piece of work," the hacker commented.

"Yes, she is," a new voice agreed, stepping clear of the yurt. Mel headed over to join the other two, draping her

arm affectionately around Janice's shoulders. "Forgive me for not joining you on the battlefield but..."

"It's okay," the hacker replied absently, eyes still fixed on Lao's wife. She was distracted by Xena's snicker at a comment Lao Ma made about Borias. With a slight turn, the tall woman of C'bin was facing Xena. Xero couldn't help but feel caught in her gaze as well.

"You must be Xena," she said simply.

The warrior's eyebrows rose slightly. "Oh, you've heard of me," she said without surprise.

Xero turned to glare at Xena, muttering "asshole" under her breath. When she looked back she was certain Lao Ma was looking directly at her.

"Oh yes," she said with respect. "They say you're a dangerous woman."

"Well, they're right," Xena replied without missing a beat.

"Can she see me?" Xero asked Janice who watched the exchange with interest.

"Nah, this is the past. How can you be seen? You're already here as Xena and Xero isn't born yet," Janice replied honestly. "Still, I've read in Gabrielle's scrolls that Lao Ma was supposed to possess some unusual powers. If anyone out here could see you, I guess it'd be her. Either way, it doesn't matter—you are dangerous."

"Janice, don't encourage her," Mel scolded as she led the trio into the yurt.

The three women watched for a time as Borias and Lao discussed the ins and outs of negotiations. Xena immersed herself in opium, rarely taking her eyes of the enigmatic Chinese woman. Blue eyes narrowed dangerously when she sensed that Borias was as captivated as she was. With blinding speed, a knife flew from the warrior's hand and impaled itself into a serving platter near Lao Ma's fingers. "That's my piece of meat you're reaching for," she growled dangerously.

Without hesitation Lao Ma's eyes captured Xena's. "You're wrong. I don't eat meat."

The warrior's eyes widened at the implication then narrowed dangerously. "Well now," Xero chuckled. "Xena finally catches on." The hacker looked down at the archeologist standing at her side. "Please tell me she makes up for lost time tonight."

"Why don't you step outside and see for yourself," Mel suggested coldly, a stern frown on her face.

With a shrug, the hacker complied and stepped outside the yurt to see Lao Ma kneeling over Xena's prone body.

Borias ran up, looking at Xena suspiciously. "What happened?" he and Xero asked in unison.

"I'm sorry, Borias," Lao Ma replied. "I'll be leaving immediately. I don't think an alliance is appropriate, now." Swiftly, the Chinese woman bent over to whisper something to Xena, then gathered herself to go.

Xero was stunned. "I don't get it," she protested. "All because Xena got friendly?"

"Xena tried to kill her," Janice supplied. "Ended up getting her ass kicked. Lao Ma's got some pretty interesting moves."

"I don't doubt it," Xero replied with a smirk. "So what did she say?"

"Can you remember?" Mel asked gently.

Xero looked at Mel. Something about the woman unsettled her. Like looking into a mirror and seeing a kinder reflection looking back, Xero could see in those gentle blue eyes everything she would never be. Mel understood it too and smiled sadly.

"I'm not who you think I am," the hacker whispered. Gazing down at Xena, her heart went out to the prone woman. "I don't have her drive."

"Fill yourself with desire and see only illusion. Empty yourself of desire and understand the great mystery of things," Mel whispered softly.

Xero returned her attention to the Southerner. "That has got to be the lamest advice I've ever heard."

"It's over, Xena." Borias said with a growl. "You have until sunrise to get out of this camp. After that—I'll kill you on sight."

Xena was gone within the hour. A few possessions packed onto her horse, she trotted from the campsite. After a nod from Borias, Chuang followed.

The warrior woman camped several miles from camp near a large rock formation. She ate a meal of dried rations and sent her follower ahead to scout. After warming herself by her fire, she returned to her horse. She mounted with some difficulty, relaxing visibly when she was seated.

"Where's she going?" Xero asked, perplexed.

Janice shook her head. "Nowhere. She sleeps on horseback out in the open like this. She'd be too slow to

defend herself were she caught on the ground.”

Xero sat down by the fire that didn't warm her and looked thoughtfully up at the soul that was supposed to have been hers. “Does this sort of shit happen to Rielle?” she asked.

“What do you mean?” Mel asked, taking the seat next to her.

“Has she gone on the tour of Gabrielle's childhood? Stuff like that?”

Janice shrugged taking a seat next to Mel. “If she has, someone else must be leading the way.”

“Lucky her,” the hacker quipped.

“I'll have you know I was quite popular in my day. Did my fair share of speaking engagements. Besides, since when do you care what Rielle is dreaming about?” Janice teased gently. Apprehensive that she might be pushing the hacker too fast, she was reassured by the slight approving smile that creased Mel's lips.

Xero rolled her eyes. “Don't read anything into it, Covington. I just wondered. That's all.”

“Then why are you so anxious to wake up?” This time it was Mel who teased, leaning into the hacker in an affectionate manner.

Xero bristled. “Because I'm not going to let some bitch from Archive think she can kidnap someone from under my nose, that's why.”

“Be honest, Xero,” Janice suggested. “If it isn't about Rielle, then it's about someone who thinks she's better for Rielle than you are.”

“That's not true!” Xero insisted. “I know I'm no good for Rielle, so drop it.”

Xero said nothing more all night. While she knew time was passing at a different rate in her dream, she was still desperate for a way to wake up. Finding no solution at hand, she tried to distract herself by listening to the casual conversation exchanged by Mel and Janice. So strange, she thought, to hear two people talk to each other with such affection and mutual respect. From time to time her eyes were drawn away from the lovers to the warrior woman, bundled in furs gazing at the firelight. After all she'd seen, when Xero seriously tried to picture herself as Xena, no matter how she looked at it, she didn't measure up to the twisted hateful woman on the horse.

“Argo would have loved this,” Janice said to Mel, drawing Xero from her study of Xena. “The open grasslands.”

Xero watched as Mel put an affectionate arm around the archeologist. “I miss her too, love,” the Southerner offered gently.

“It was so long ago, but I still remember that dog...” Janice choked up and turned her head, refusing to cry in front of the hacker.

“I remember our last morning together,” Mel offered quietly. “You brought me breakfast in bed, with a rose. Said something about me being as beautiful as the day you met me.”

“I was telling the truth,” Janice confirmed.

“Janice,” Mel smiled. “I was ninety-two years old.”

“Yeab, but I was in my eighties, my eyesight was kinda shot.”

Xero grinned in spite of herself, genuinely happy for the two women who seemed to love each other as passionately in death as they did in life. After a moment's reprieve however, events swirled around her again and she watched Xena's life as it unfolded around her, sometimes sparking unwanted memories of her own. The kidnapping of Ming T'ien reminded her of the time she'd locked Ellen in the closet at the orphanage. At ten years old, Xero was a very real threat not only to her peers, but older children as well.

She wasn't surprised when Xena was sold-out by C'huang and Borias, and she looked forward to both men paying for it. There was no doubt in her mind that Xena would attend to that betrayal. Unimpressed by Ming T'su, she noticed a new fire in young Ming T'ien's eyes. Like the tears already dried when Ellen was released, Ming T'ien was a colder child upon his rescue. “How many monsters have I created?” she wondered absently.

Certain Xena would meet her demise in the woods, she waited uneasily as the hunting dogs gained. She was as surprised as Xena to see Lao Ma's appearance.

“Come with me if you wish your freedom,” the enigmatic woman said, catching both Xero and Xena in her gaze.

“Why are you doing this?” both women asked in unison.

Her voice was calm and controlled as she answered, but the urgency was clear. “I have been blessed, or cursed, with the ability to see into the souls of others. You don't know it yet, Xena, but you're a remarkable woman—

*capable of greatness. Come quick. We'll take refuge in my home.
Something about the word home struck a chord with Xero. She looked at Janice and Mel intently.
"Please," she said. "Help me find Rielle."*

*Time cast a spell on you, that you won't forget me
— Stevie Nicks*

Chapter 6: Rebooting

Waking with a start, Xero's eyes cast furiously around the room. Something was about to happen. As if on cue, her mobile unit buzzed—a call was incoming. In an instant she was on her feet and across the room. In one fluid motion the device was activated and at her ear.

"Yes?" she demanded of the unknown caller. "You've found her? Good work, Shad. Hold on, lemme grab a pen."

Xero grabbed one of the pens from the desk and a scrap of printer paper. Listening carefully, she printed the information as neatly as possible, hoping that when the time came, she'd be able to read her own writing. "Paula James, VP of Marketing for Archive. Okay, home address? Is she likely to be there?" The hacker glanced at her watch; it was late morning which meant she'd be riding a full day in sunlight. Shoving health risks aside, she considered her options. "I'll leave right away, but even then I won't get back down until evening. Where is she likely to be? Fencing studio, huh. I suppose that makes sense. You got that address too?"

Beginning to pace, Xero noticed absently that her legs were barely sore—the hot spring had done wonders. "Shad, this is gonna sound kinda nuts, but I need you to do call the regulars for me. We'll meet at the 'horn later." She paused a moment listening carefully. "I don't care what Blue says. It's none of her fucking business. I need to have a talk with Paula, find out where Rielle is and go get her. Think you can work up some sort of credentials for me in the meantime? It might have to be all purpose, 'cause I don't know what's happened to her. When I get her, I'll meet you guys at the 'Horn. Great, thanks, Shadow."

"You know, you'll alienate all your hacker friends if you start with phrases like 'thank you,'" Henry said with an amused grin from the base of the stairs.

"You're lucky I don't kick your ass for that stunt you pulled last night," she warned over her shoulder.

"No doubt," he allowed, his good humor unaffected. "Still, I'd suspect your legs are feeling a bit better. It's sunny and cold out there. Last night it was dark and colder. You wouldn't have gone very far your legs feeling the way they did. C'mon, I've made some breakfast. The least you can do is eat some before going."

The rumbling of her stomach answered for her and she followed the healer up the stairs. "So I take it you believe this past life/soul crap?" she asked as she sat down behind a plate of steaming food.

Henry shrugged. "I believe just about anything, try to hedge my bets that way. If it pisses off the Fundies, I'm all for it."

Xero nodded, having to agree with him there. Glancing around the dining area, she realized just how little of the place she'd really seen. "You've got a nice thing going up here, Henry. Argo seems to like it."

The healer turned around and looked at the iguana sunning himself lazily near the window on the kitchen counter. He looked back at the hacker nervously. "I'd like to keep him if you don't mind. I never knew Renée had a thing for reptiles."

Xero smirked. There were a lot of things his ex-wife enjoyed that he didn't know about. No sense hurting him with it though. "Yeah, I'm sure Ba-- Renée would have wanted you to keep him. Every time he bites you, you can think of her. If he gets too spazzy just rub his belly and he'll fall right asleep."

Henry grinned. "I'll keep that in mind." Picking up a few items from the counter, he handed them to Xero. "Don't forget her hat," he added, passing over the worn Mickey Mouse baseball cap she'd worn since her associate's death. "And this Renée's, too. You might need it for the drive down; it's going to be cold."

Xero looked at the now familiar black and green checked flannel shirt as if she'd seen a ghost. The warm flannel felt familiar in her hands. With an absent nod, she accepted the gift.

Healer and hacker ate in silence. A truce had settled between them and neither wanted to spoil it by risking words. The food was good, Xero mumbled as much, and Henry muttered something about his mother's recipe. Nothing else was said until each look up from an empty plate. Brushing her hair from her face with her fingers Xero broke the silence. "I'd better get going."

Henry nodded in agreement. "Rielle moved your bike into the garage and I took the liberty of charging the batteries. Your tools and stuff are already on it." He walked her to the bike as she donned the flannel shirt, jacket and heavy boots. Before she could grab the helmet, he stopped her. "Good luck to you, Xero. I hope this all works out."

She nodded. "Ares will be stopped, one way or another."

He shook his head with a smile. "It's not just Ares I'm talking about. Rielle is a good person. Don't get me wrong, I don't really care what happens to you. But she seems to think that you'll make her happy. If that just so happens to work out for you too...I mean if Rielle's happy and you end up being happy too, well, I don't really mind that."

Xero smiled. "Nice thought Henry, but I can't say I follow you. This is about fighting a virus, not about finding a soul mate. You're a hopeless romantic and someday it'll do you in."

"You're fighting more than a virus," he called loudly as she rolled her bike away. "You're fighting for peace and your own peace of mind."

Still smiling, the hacker thought about his words as she headed for the highway. "*Fighting for peace is like screwing for virginity,*" she thought, gunning the motorcycle's engine and heading for home.

Xero didn't watch the spectacular vista unwind as she sped down the twisty highway. Her attention was so solely focused on getting Rielle back that she was scarcely aware of how much her eyes burned, even shielded as they were by the tinted visor of the helmet and her own sunglasses. Henry hadn't been kidding about the cold. A T-shirt and flannel shirt weren't much protection from the wind chill, even under the heavy jacket. Finally, she pulled over to withdraw a pair of riding gloves from a saddlebag. Deciding she might as well stretch her legs and take a pee, she headed to the Andy Gump to the side of the vista.

Pausing for a few moments when she emerged to clear her lungs, she idly considered what Henry had said. She knew it was a joke, if not all of it then certainly most of it.

"*But what if I am Xena,*" she considered. "*Rielle said that Xena would be critical to solving this whole mess. How? All I've seen so far is a woman who learned how to kill by fifteen and is raving mad running around China at the moment. How is that going to get Ares or whatever it is off the nets?*"

Pushing questions for which she had no answers aside, she donned her helmet once again and walked to her bike. With little else to do to occupy her mind as she drove, she returned to the puzzle, looking at it from another angle.

"*What about Rielle? Is she a deluded lunatic? If she is, then why am I driving like a bat outta hell to get her out of what ever joint Paula has her locked up in? Come on, Xero—this is a bit more work than you're used to, just to get someone in the sack. Maybe it's Paula,*" she allowed as she slowed down for a tight turn. "*I saw that look she shot me when I ended up at Rielle's house. She thinks she's got it all. The legitimate job, Olympic medals...Rielle. Hell she probably think Rielle's wandering heart is a symptom of mental illness, especially when it's directed at me.*" Her eyebrows came together in a sharp frown. "*Well, is it?*" she asked herself.

Like a movie, scenes from the hacker's life shifted before her. The isolation of one orphanage after the next, the fights to establish herself in the pecking order, and the outbursts of downright cruelty. Those were the things that set her apart. When the teachers began to show signs of fear, she knew it was time to move on.

With a grin, she remembered her entrance into the hacking community at large. She was not just good—she was the best. Now everyone was after her, but not to beat her down because she was

new, but to lift her up because she was good. They all wanted something—insight into her technique, a shot at making a big arrest, a job done or a free meal. It was painful at first realizing that people who offered *anything* in exchange for something left as soon as that something was given. A badly bruised heart finally broken had turned Xero into the sexual predator who took but seldom gave.

“*Rielle really should be locked up if that’s what she wants,*” she decided. It was no use wondering how things might have been had she grown up differently. Those thoughts ended in tears that had dried by the time she was ten.

Lacking anything better to ponder, Xero started to fantasize about the syscop in bed. She still had several hours back to town and if she played her cards right, drawing every element of the seduction out just so, she’d finish up as she hit the San Fernando Valley. With an easy smile, she tried to remember if Rielle wore a wristwatch and earrings.

Bringing the bike to a smooth halt in front of the fencing studio, Xero had a look around before entering. The place was empty save for a lone receptionist at the desk. Shadow had warned her that the place would be mostly vacant, not up for business as usual after a recent remodeling. With an air of professionalism, she strode through the double doors and confronted the receptionist, cowing her easily.

“I’m here to sign off on construction,” Xero announced, reading from the folded piece of printer paper she’d scribbled the directions on. “What the hell are you doing here? The studio is supposed to be vacant.”

“The building got signed off two days ago,” the woman protested. “We’re gearing up our classes starting next week.”

“Don’t tell me you didn’t get the e-mail? A slew of jobs handled by the person who checked you out came up with errors. I’ve got to redo them myself.” Xero looked bored and annoyed, then regarded the small woman behind the desk as if she were an insect. A potentially tasty insect, but an insect none the less.

“We, ah, haven’t been logging on because of the scare. People dying from the nets,” she answered meekly.

“And that’s supposed to be *my* problem?” Xero laughed. “Just get out of here, kid. Let me do my job.” Without further protest, the young woman got up and grabbed her purse. “You still got the inspection sign from last time?” the hacker asked before she moved away from her desk. With a quick nod, the woman fished it out under a small pile of application print outs. “Stick it on the door on your way out,” she instructed, then turned her back on the woman, beginning her ‘inspection’ in earnest.

She waited several more minutes, familiarizing herself with the building before returning to the front door and removing the sign from the window. Returning to the main work out room, she picked up a couple of sabers from their mounts on the wall. Some more exploration uncovered a special file for removing nicks from the metal blade. Picking up the file and a polishing cloth Xero sat down on a bench and began to sharpen her sword. The movement was as smooth and fluid as if she’d been doing it forever.

In actuality, Xero had never held a sword before in her life. She wasn’t shocked by her awareness—compared to her dreams, this sort of crinkle in reality was easy to take. Instead she thought about the woman who would be walking through the door at any moment. Rielle’s wife. Xero calmly sharpened the sword as she waited for the chance to prove once and for all that she was every bit as capable as the one time world fencing champion.

Paula James came to an abrupt halt in front of the fencing studio in her indigo black Ford Enterprise. Puzzled by the intimidating Russian motorcycle parked out front, she climbed out of the cab of her vehicle with caution. The front door to the studio was unlocked, so she pushed it open. The office lights were on and the computer up and running while the rest of the building was dark. Frowning, Paula called out the receptionist’s name several times before heading into the main body

of the studio. She grew irritated; it wasn't the first time Patsy had left for no apparent reason. She mumbled something negative about blondes and flipped on the main light switch.

Blinking in surprise, she was coldly regarded by a woman seated on a stretching bench. "I hope you don't talk like that in front of your wife," the hacker drawled.

Paula crossed her arms defensively in front of her chest. "You're the one Rielle's been playing around with. Xero, wasn't it?"

The woman nodded. "Maybe if you didn't keep her locked up, she'd see you as a more suitable playmate?"

"I don't have to stand here and take this crap from you," Paula growled as she turned for the door.

"Well, I'm afraid you do," Xero commented pleasantly as Paula shook the locked door. "I programmed the door to lock five seconds after you opened it. So, unless you brought really good ear plugs with you, you're gonna have to listen to what I've got to say."

"I'll bet you think you're real cute, don't you?" Paula shot back acidly. "Notorious hacker seduces syscop. You're probably so keen on playing into her little deluded fantasies. You must have an open field with the best syscop in the business off your back now."

Xero rolled her eyes. She was really hoping Paula didn't genuinely love Rielle. It would have made her life a lot easier. But the pride in the other woman's voice told another story. Paula was proud of her spouse, and quite broken up over what had happened, though fighting to hide it well.

"Paula, I'm going to spell things out for you. I'll spare you the sob story because you won't buy it and I don't have that kind of time. If you haven't noticed, the nets aren't safe at the moment, not for hackers or anyone else. People have a good shot at unsubbing every time they log on. Rielle contacted me because she believes that between the two of us we can fix what is wrong and make the Network safe again. If she wants to solve the problem by calling me Xena and herself Gabrielle, what's the big deal?"

Paula marched over to Xero, her eyes burning with hatred. "Because Rielle is in love with Xena, this ideal fantasy woman she made up. Have you ever tried to compete with a fictitious character?" she demanded.

Inwardly Xero grimaced. "*Fuck, woman! I am a fictitious character,*" she inwardly groaned. Such was the price of not remembering one's real name and building an identity from scratch. "Trust me, Paula, Xena is anything but ideal."

"I saw the way Rielle looked at you. Reality aside, you're Xena for her. And for you to play on that, just for...for whatever it is you're getting from her is sick."

"Issues of mental health aside," Xero continued, an odd sense of calm washing over her as she began to get angry. "Rielle is locked up and you're going to help me get her out."

"Like hell I will," Paula snapped back.

With a slow smile Xero turned her back and walked toward the stretching bench. Picking up two sabers, she tossed one to Paula. "I've got a feeling you'll change your mind."

Paula caught the saber easily, looked at it, looked back at Xero, and laughed. "Oh, this is rich. How chivalrous of you. We're supposed to sword fight for the hand of the fair Rielle. You've gotta be kidding."

Without warning the hacker lunged, sword heading straight for Paula's middle. With a shocked expression, she parried the blow without an instant to spare. "Feel like I'm kidding to you?" Xero asked lightly.

"You're insane!" the former world champion shrieked as she backed up.

"Sane or not, you're going to help me," the hacker said tightly, goading the other woman into attacking.

"I will *not* play into this," Paula affirmed as she blocked each blow. "You're deluded." She missed one parry and Xero's blade easily sliced a shallow cut across her left shoulder. Looking at the blood seeping through the thin fabric, her eyes narrowed. "That does it, bitch. You're gonna die."

The sword fight easily lasted ten minutes. A few minutes into it, both women carefully controlled their breathing even as beads of sweat dotted their brows. Paula fought with trained

precision. Her moves were economical, classical, and well studied maneuvers. Xero's style was less graceful. She hit with power and force but often expended more energy than needed per blow. Like a rusty engine started after years of neglect, she fought to remember what she'd seen Xena do and then mimicked those moves. There was a lag in her timing that began to lessen just as Paula began to take advantage of it.

"Come on, Xena," she taunted. "No backflips? No running up the walls? Where's the aerodynamic impossibilities you're so famous for?"

Xero parried and lunged as she considered the other woman's words. "*Did Xena do backflips?*" she thought to herself as she remembered all she'd seen Xena do. She didn't recall any. Xena fought brilliantly from horseback and on foot, but aerodynamic stunts didn't come to mind. The search through her recollections brought something else to mind though. At Paula's next strike, Xero caught the blade between her thumb and forefinger and pulled it from Paula's grasp. Dropping her own sword, she quickly hit two pressure points on the other woman's neck, dropping her to her knees.

As Paula knelt there, gasping for air, Xero realized she'd not been quite quick enough with her catch. She'd been cut rather deeply between her thumb and forefinger and on the palm of her hand. Looking around for something to stop the bleeding, she glanced at Paula who now had a few drops of blood coming from her nose. "Give up yet?" she asked as an afterthought.

Paula nodded, but Xero didn't notice, busy retrieving a towel to bind her hand. She returned to the suffocating woman s she ripped the white material into strips. Paula tugged at Xero's jeans to get her attention and nodded vigorously.

Like a jolt, Xero remembered that Paula was dying and quickly jabbed a couple of pressure points on the woman's neck. Nothing happened.

Paula's struggle became more frantic and Xero got annoyed. "I'm rusty at this," she explained. "Stop squirming or I'll just leave you." Paula instantly froze. Xero feared she might be too late but took careful aim anyway. With two precisely placed jabs, Paula fell over gasping, her fingers still clenched around Xero's jeans. Xero didn't bother shaking her off, but focused on tying the strip of cloth around her own hand to stop the bleeding.

"You're a fucking psychotic," Paula finally gasped when she'd gotten enough air in her lungs.

"Whatever," the hacker agreed with a shrug as she pulled the woman to her feet. "You help me get Rielle back and you'll live. The deal is as simple as that."

There wasn't much fight left in Paula as Xero dragged the Marketing V.P. outside. She snorted to herself at the sight of the outlandishly huge Ford. "Figures," she muttered as she shoved the other woman over to the bike.

"Why don't we take my car?" Paula asked as Xero pulled two pairs of handcuffs from the back inside pocket of her leather jacket.

"Because I don't trust you," she answered simply. "I'm going to wager that being handcuffed to a motorcycle without a helmet and me driving will encourage you to cooperate, tell me how to get to Rielle, and not try and tip the thing over."

"But look at the bright side," she added as she maneuvered Paula to the back of the seat and locked the first of cuffs. "You're the first woman I've let wear these that I wasn't fucking at the time." She winked at Paula who paled visibly, then jumped on, starting the engine in one fluid motion.

The hacker's guess was correct and without further struggle, Paula told her where Rielle had been committed. It was all the way across town on the West Side, but her passenger stayed quiet and very still the entire way.

Xero mentally kicked herself for not noting the name of the facility when she walked inside. Preoccupied with grabbing an unattended medical jacket from a gurney, she'd been distracted. Having handcuffed Paula's arms behind her back, she walked like she had every reason to be there. Reaching the information desk, she masked her amazement when the receptionist smiled in greeting. "Dr. Bailey, we've been expecting you." The receptionist looked over a chart and handed it to Xero.

She saw a scanned photo of herself printed on the chart. “We got word you’d be arriving to pick up a patient...”

Xero smiled back, reminding herself that she owed Shadow big time. “Yes, that’s right. And I’m dropping one off. This is Paula James. Attacked me with...” She glanced at her bandaged hand. “Something sharp. I think a seventy-two hour hold should do it.”

“Now wait just a minute, Xero,” Paula protested. Xero turned and fixed her in a steely cold gaze. “You’ll never be me,” she quietly protested as two orderlies took her away. “You’ll never take my place.”

“What was that about?” the receptionist inquired politely.

“Completely delusional.” Xero replied, stamping her thumb print on the file and handing it back. The receptionist scanned the print and waited a few moments for clearance. “I take it you’re not having trouble with your systems?” the hacker asked politely as she watched the receptionist work.

“Oh no,” the pretty brunette replied. “We haven’t had any problems so far. We’re keeping our fingers crossed.” With a smile, she signed approval on the form and called for a nurse. “Robert will take you to Ms. MacGab’s room. She’s all yours now.”

Xero quietly followed the nurse along a long corridor of rooms. Pausing outside of one, he fished into his pocket for the correct electronic key. Xero took the opportunity to glance inside the one way glass panel in the center of the door. She couldn’t help but grin.

Rielle was lying on her back on the floor, her legs propped up on her cot, doing sit ups. She signaled the nurse to wait as she watched Rielle finish her set. Counting in sets of ten, the syscop stopped at three hundred. With a nod, Xero signaled the nurse and the door was open. By the time the opening door cleared her field of view, Rielle was on her feet and ready to attack someone. Her anger quickly faded when she saw Xero’s face.

“Good evening Ms. MacGab,” the hacker said simply. “I’m Dr. Bailey and you’ve been released into my custody. Is that alright with you?”

Trying to sound casual, the syscop nodded. “Quite acceptable, Dr. Bailey,” she replied. She managed to keep her composure until they rounded the corner of the building and made it to the motorcycle. “Thank you,” Rielle said, surprising Xero with a fierce hug, “I didn’t think you’d make it down here this fast.”

“Think nothing of it,” Xero replied with a grin. “Gave me an opportunity to get acquainted with your wife.”

Rielle’s mood instantly cooled and she shivered slightly. Xero, mistaking the shiver for a chill, handed the syscop her leather jacket and the helmet she wouldn’t let Paula wear. “I don’t want to hear about Paula right now if that’s okay with you,” Rielle said quietly.

“Sure,” Xero agreed, settling onto the bike in front of the syscop. “I’m just explaining how I found you.”

The two rode in silence until they reached the Saddlehorn Pub & Grill. The place was hopping with activity, and both syscop and hacker were shocked by the number of men milling about. “What’s going on?” Xero asked Ska at the door.

The waitress ushered them inside, talking quietly. “Leave the bike, we’ll have someone else move it. You need to stay out of sight until we close. Shadow has contacted the regulars and we can meet after closing.”

“Why not just close the place now?” Xero asked, baffled.

“Because things aren’t business as usual at the moment. We can’t risk logging on to fuck up the files of all the riff-raff. Therefore, the riff-raff doesn’t know when to leave. Delirium’s screaming it’s like running a legitimate club for the night.”

Xero shuddered at the thought. “God forbid.”

“You think serving drinks to bobs is easy, I’ll will you my tray,” she shot back. “We’re getting a few syscops who are trying to match faces to rap sheets, so you’d better stay out of sight, Xero, but your friend can mill around. No offense, Rielle,” Ska added quickly. “I’m sure you’re a

capable hacker, but I've never heard of you and--"

Rielle smiled. "None taken," she assured the waitress. "I don't expect the perks and drawbacks of 'big time' until I get there."

Xero coughed. "That's fine. I'm kinda tired and it's been a long day. I'll crash in the back room, just wake me when the club closes."

Ska nodded and pressed a cold beer into the hacker's hand as she keyed open the lock to the private back room door.

Xero didn't hand the beer back, but stood quietly, asking Rielle a silent question. She could hang with the rest of the crowd until closing or join her in the private room. Rielle paused for a moment then turned her attention back to the waitress. She didn't want to risk being spotted by the other syscops, true, but there were other factors as well. "I'm kinda tired myself. I'll stay here with, Xero."

Ska nodded. "Fine. Beer's on the house, Xero. I for one am glad you're back. I seem so much nicer in comparison. Careful, that the room is a little chilly. Don't want you getting frostbite."

"We'll be fine," Xero said after a sip of beer. "Just let us know when everyone is here." With that, Xero stepped aside for Rielle to enter, she followed her into the back room, the door closing with a hiss behind them.

Rielle looked around the dimly lit room and shivered slightly. "Your friend was right. It's kinda cold in here." She turned around to see the hacker looking at her with an annoyed expression on her face. "Oops, sorry", she amended. "The *waitress* was right. Is that better?" Xero nodded and began her own exploration of the room. "What is it with you, Xero?" Rielle asked, shoving her hands deeper into the pockets of the hacker's jacket. "Is it a friend phobia or something?"

Xero shrugged, feeling too tired to verbally spar with the syscop. "Or something," she agreed. "Why don't you take the couch," she suggested, "I'll take the floor."

Rielle's attention snapped over to the long couch to the side of the room. Obviously the most comfortable place to sleep, there wasn't really any other suitable place in the room. Several hard chairs surrounded a small table and a work desk, but that was it for furnishings. "You can have the couch," Rielle offered. Xero shot her a look of barely controlled rage. It was clear the hacker was tired and cranky. "Or we could share it," she added softly. Noting the hacker's bandaged hand as she crossed her arms in front of her chest, Rielle rushed over, worried.

"What happened to you?" the syscop demanded, examining the bandaged hand.

"It's nothing. I didn't catch a sword quite right, that's all," Xero said, barely tolerating Rielle's gentle probing.

"You *caught* a sword?" she asked, dumbfounded.

Xero looked at her. Blue eyes vibrant, they also betrayed just how tired the hacker really was. "I got in a sword fight with Paula when she wouldn't tell me where you were. I caught the blade of her saber, sort of, and did that neck thingie. Then she told me." As an afterthought she quickly added, "There isn't anything wrong with my blood, it's clean."

Rielle shook off the hacker's warning, "I'm not worried about that, Xero, I'm just surprised you managed to beat Paula in a sword fight. You never told me you knew how to fence," she added carefully.

"I don't," Xero admitted. "I've been watching Xena in the dreams and stuff. Hackers have quick memories so I just mimicked her."

It was a struggle for Rielle to keep the look of elation off her face. Fighting to keep her voice non-committal, she acknowledged the statement and returned her attention to the couch once more. "You look kinda tired. Why don't we get some sleep," she offered, forgetting to let go of the hacker's hand.

"Top or bottom?" Xero asked her eyes still locked with the syscop's.

"That's a bit personal," Rielle replied with a cold glare, pointedly removing her hand from the hacker's.

Xero rolled her eyes, wondering if she'd *ever* get to sleep. "No, I mean do you want me to sleep on top of you or do you want to sleep on top of me? The couch isn't wide enough to sleep

side by side.”

“Oh. I thought we’d each take one end,” Rielle answered, blushing slightly. “Legs crossing in the middle.”

“Fine,” Xero agreed. “But my feet have been in biker boots all day, I was trying to spare you that...experience.”

“I see,” Rielle replied quietly. “In that case, since we’re only talking about sleeping arrangements mind you, you can sleep on top. I suspect I’m colder than you are anyway.”

“Of course,” Xero agreed with a wry grin. “I’d never imply you’d be anything *but* a top in any other context.”

Rielle was annoyed that the hacker’s tone told her the larger woman didn’t believe a word of what she’d just said. She got a brief moment of revenge however when Xero took off her boots.

“Fine,” she said with a groan. “But could you leave those boots on the other side of the room.”

Xero complied with a frown, then stood waiting for Rielle to get comfortable. Still wearing the heavy leather jacket over her silk blouse, the syscop stretched out on her back, her head propped up on the pillowed arm of the couch. Xero took off her flannel shirt and joined her. Lying down on her right side, she only had to bend her long legs slightly to fit. Using Rielle’s abdomen as a pillow, she twisted her shoulders slightly getting comfortable. One arm reached under Rielle’s thigh, the other reached over resting on the smaller woman’s hip. To Rielle’s immediate distraction, Xero’s shoulder was resting firmly between her legs. Xero settled the flannel shirt over her exposed shoulder and shifted once or twice to get comfortable.

When the hacker seemed settled, Rielle let one hand rest on the hacker’s hand at her hip, her other hand making its way to the top of Xero’s head, gently touching her hair. “So your dreams,” she said quietly. “You’re still having them?”

“Oh yeah,” Xero replied sleepily. “Believe it or don’t, Janice Covington is even more annoying than you are.”

“That’s good to hear,” Rielle remarked.

“Rielle,” Xero said softly, capturing the syscop’s attention as her warm breath spilled out over sensitive skin. “Allowing for even a second that I *am* Xena, have you considered that whatever insight I’ve been given from these dreams won’t be enough to battle Ares? I’m guessing what you need is the reformed Xena who traveled the countryside with Gabrielle. That isn’t the Xena I see, and it’s not a Xena I could relate to.”

Rielle considered Xero’s words seriously. “Wherever you are, Xero,” she whispered back. “It’ll be enough. It *has* to be.” Neither woman spoke again although it was long moments before either drifted off to sleep.

“Annoying?! Janice Covington barked loudly, splashing Xero in the face with hot water, ‘I’ll show you annoying.’”

The hacker sputtered to consciousness gulping down mouthfuls of water in the process. She was seated in a rectangular hot tub, naked, the archeologist leaning over splashing her playfully.

“What the fuck is going on?” Xero sputtered. After a moment of taking in her surroundings, she realized that she wasn’t alone in the tub. “What’s Xena doing under the water?” she asked.

“Just watch,” Janice instructed. Lao Ma sat on the edge of the tub across from her, brushing her long ebony hair. Ming T’zu burst into the bathing room, making a number of accusations the Chinese woman calmly refuted. Xero watched the barbed exchanges between the two, keeping a wary eye on the warrior beneath the surface of the water, struggling to hold her breath. When Lao Ma ducked her head beneath the water and passed desperately needed air to her fugitive, the hacker smiled approvingly.

“Well, that explains a lot,” Xero remarked to Janice after Ming T’zu left.

“What explains what?” Janice asked, her appreciative gaze dancing between Xero and Xena.

“Lao Ma’s history as a consort. This whole ‘eliminate desire’ philosophy. The woman’s obviously been burned by in the past and she figures on reaching nirvana by banishing those impulses. At the same time, she’s drawn to Xena in a desirey kind of way, but figures this hair washing routine is the way to get a sensual fix and not fall off the anti-desire wagon.”

Janice listened to the hacker's assessment as Lao Ma tended to Xena's bath. After adding a variety of pleasant smelling oils and salts to the water, the former consort carefully washed the warrior's long tangled unkempt mane. Xena, still skittish, obviously enjoyed the attention, but kept a tight lid on how much she showed it.

"Interesting theory," Janice allowed, surprised by the hacker's insight.

"I'll bet she can hear me." Xero whispered.

"Lao Ma?" Janice asked, "You've wondered about that before. I don't see how that can be," she added. "What we're seeing here has happened before. You can't change anything."

"Maybe not," the hacker admitted. "But you said yourself that Lao Ma had unusual abilities. What if I was here the first time? What if Lao Ma hears me as her own conscience or as Xena's inner thoughts?" Not waiting for the archeologist's response the hacker easily slipped from the water and moved to stand just behind and to the side of the Chinese woman. Her tone was sensual, seductive, and Janice felt the room heat up with tension.

"Fill yourself with desire and see only illusion. Empty yourself of desire and understand the great mystery of things," Xero said, leaning in by the Chinese woman's ear. Lao Ma's hand trembled slightly as she slowly poured water over Xena's hair. "How can you banish desire unless you've known desire, known passion, truly been at the mercy of the raging flood? This woman is desire," Xero purred. "She's the embodiment of unrestrained passion. You have to learn the din of desire from her if she's going to learn the quiet of emptiness from you."

"What the hell are you doing?" Mel demanded, rushing into the room straight to the hacker's side.

"Take it easy, Mel," Janice soothed from across the tub.

"Janice," Mel urged. "We don't know what she's going to do. We know how things are supposed to happen, but Xero isn't supposed to be a participant. Lao Ma should not be acting from her prompting."

"I think we should let her be," Janice maintained. "So far her instincts have been good. Her heart's in the right place, no matter how much she denies she has one. If this is what it takes to get this train wreck under way, then so be it. Like Xero said, maybe she was here the first time."

"Whaddya mean, 'train wreck'?" Xero asked, looking over at Janice quizzically.

Inwardly kicking herself Janice smiled, as disarmingly as she could. "Nothing, forget I said it. Come on, let Xena get dressed and lets go."

The trio of women stepped onto a courtyard to watch Lao Ma and Xena engaged in a conversation over an ornate vase. Xena shattered it with a heavy foot causing Lao Ma to inquire, "Would you kill a mosquito with an axe?"

Stepping behind the warrior, the former consort drew a carved wooden hair pin from her tightly wound bun. After commenting on its beauty, she threw it at the table where it struck with a solid thud. Xena's eyes widened in appreciation. "That's good," she said.

Lao Ma remained calm. "It could be a very usable weapon-- if thrown at the right body part."

Xena agreed. "You could kill someone, using a hair brooch."

Lao Ma regarded her charge calmly. "If necessary. I don't like to kill, however."

Xena smirked. "Everyone has their preferences. I happen to like a good kill."

Xero rolled her eyes. "Obviously she hasn't learned the ins and outs of impressing women at this point," she commented dryly.

Mel, leaning against the wall with a remaining vase, crossed her arms. "And you're saying this is all a seduction?"

The hacker nodded. "From Xena's point of view, it is. I think we're all agreed she's basically an animal at this point. An animal who has completely captivated the illustrious Lao Ma. If Xena can't kill it, eat it, or sell it, then fucking it is bound to come to mind." Xero looked at Lao Ma appreciatively. "Can't say my thoughts wouldn't run the same way if I were in Xena's place."

"Xero, you were in Xena's place," Janice reminded her dryly.

Lao Ma paused as if deciding something and looked at Xena sadly. "You're so full of anger and hate."

The warrior shrugged. "Everyone's gotta be full of something."

After putting another bottle on the table, Lao Ma startled Xena and Xero by shattering it without physical contact. Xena tried to shatter the last bottle the same way but to no avail. After a few silent moments, Lao Ma began to laugh, drawing enraged glares from hacker and warrior. "I'm sorry, Xena, but you're trying to attack the bottle with your will."

"What else is there?" the two asked together.

Lao Ma grinned, seemingly at both. “Exactly. The entire world is driven by a will— blind and ruthless. In order to transcend the limitations of that world, you need to stop willing—stop desiring— stop hating.” Xena asked how such a thing could happen and the Chinese woman’s expression softened. “Heaven endures—and the Earth lasts a long time, because they do not live for themselves. Therefore, she who would live a long time—should live for others, serve others.”

“Careful what you ask for, Lao Ma,” Xero warned, her lips near the other woman’s ear. “You might just get it. Do you really know from which you speak? Are you ready to teach Xena this lesson. How can you show her a soul emptied of desire, if she has not seen your soul consumed with it? Look at her,” the hacker gently commanded. “Is that not a look of love?”

“I could serve you, if that’s what you mean,” Xena softly replied as Mel shot Janice a worried glance.

Xero smiled in satisfaction when the comment caught the Chinese woman slightly off guard. The smile faded to a frown when Lao Ma outlined exactly what she intended Xena to do—to serve Ming T’zu the next day when he arrived.

“You ask a high price, Lao Ma,” Xero murmured. “But Xena will pay it. Will the same be said of you when it is time for you to learn your lessons?” Xero’s voice was cold and Janice noted a protective edge to it.

Mel watched the exchange with growing apprehension. “I don’t like this, Janice,” she whispered to her companion. “I don’t like this one bit.”

Janice nodded, made uncomfortable by the exchange as well. “But we know these events happened, nothing is changing.”

The Southerner shuddered. “Nothing is changing here, but what about her?” she asked looking pointedly at the woman standing between Lao Ma and Xena. “Janice, I think she’s getting worse.”

The archeologist snorted. “Xero, worse? Impossible.”

Xero endured the meal in silence. She appreciated Xena’s struggle not to kill Ming T’zu but said nothing when she overcame that desire. When the meal was finished she followed as Xena was led upstairs to see Lao T’zu, the comatose ruler of the kingdom of Lao. Xena listened to Lao Ma’s words with interest, standing close to the former consort. The hacker smiled when it seemed clear that the enigmatic woman was aware and unsettled by the warrior’s proximity.

“Feel the heat,” she whispered into Lao Ma’s ear. “Blue eyes are burning a path across your skin. Unusual in your land, aren’t they? Blue eyes? You could fall in them forever, losing yourself, emptying your soul.”

“This wisdom comes from Heaven,” Lao Ma said quietly, answering Xena’s question, a slight flush coloring her cheeks. “What difference does it make who gets credit for it—Lao Ma or Lao T’zu?”

Xena nodded in understanding. “Yeah, nothing seems to phase you— except that boy I kidnapped. Every time he ignores you, that cuts deep.”

Lao Ma sighed sadly, “I know, it’s foolish of me. Just because we give birth to them doesn’t mean we own them.”

“He’s your son?” Xena and Xero asked, both women equally stunned.

Lao Ma gazed into Xena’s eyes for a moment, coming to a decision. With a small private smile, she took Xena’s hand and guided her to another chamber in the palace. Before entering, she took down her hair, brushing it out with long smooth strokes. She did the same for Xena and gave her a lighter kimono to wear. Once her own clothes were changed, she led Xena into the chamber.

Without saying a word, the former consort nodded toward a mat in the center of the room. Xena lay down as Lao Ma took a kneeling position next to her. Closing her eyes and focusing her energy, Lao Ma slowly moved her hands back and forth over Xena’s legs, sending the healing energy to the damaged limbs.

Xero could almost feel the electricity course through her body. For long minutes, she simply experienced the comforting warmth with Xena. Xero looked around the room once but didn’t see any sign of her two guides. Focusing on Xena and Lao Ma once again, she added her own will to the mix of energy. Xena smiled, a soft sound escaping her throat as Lao Ma’s hands nearly faltered.

“How can you show Xena The Way when you don’t know where she’s supposed to go?” Xero asked softly, her voice barely a whisper. “Can you damp a fire burning out of control without getting singed? Do you really know what it is to be a raging flood?” Xero’s voice wasn’t taunting—it was soft, gentle, lilting, like the song of a deadly siren. Lao Ma’s hands slowed in their movements as Xena’s head rolled from side to side in rapture.

“You started this fire,” the hacker continued. “Will you put it out with the water of your mouth?”

Flushed and unsettled, Lao Ma backed away from Xena’s body standing in one fluid motion. She walked to the other side of the room, looking at her unconscious charge with a mixture of affection and fear. What she didn’t realize was that she walked right over to Xero who gazed at her with the eyes of a snake contemplating a mouse.

“She’s damaged,” the hacker urged, her voice husky and deep. “You can heal her soul just like you’ve healed her legs. Her language is desire and passion. To teach her yours, you have to understand hers. You’ve been looking for a way to reach her, to touch her deeply. This is it.”

Lao Ma smiled, a giving, radiant smile as if a troublesome puzzle had just been solved. “Come to me, Xena,” she said clearly, waking the woman lying on the mat.

Xena opened her eyes, confusion quickly shifting to elation as she touched her healed legs. With a joyous shout she dashed towards the wall, ran up it a good distance, then back flipped to her feet once again.

“I’ll be damned,” Xero muttered. “She does do back flips.”

With a smile that could light up the pitch dark night, Xena ran into Lao Ma’s arms. Arms that were open and welcoming. Desperate for some way to say thank you, she turned the one language she could speak proficiently—her body. After the shortest instant of being held, Xena lowered first her eyes then her lips to Lao Ma’s waiting mouth. With a gentleness that shocked the Chinese woman, Xena kissed her, conveying a thousand words of gratitude in that one simple act.

If Xena intended it to end with that one kiss was impossible to tell. For this time, more than air was exchanged between the two as raging flood and tranquil pond melded into the common element of water. Both women were smiling when the kiss broke and Lao Ma affectionately brushed a loose strand of hair from the warrior’s face. “You are so beautiful, Xena,” she whispered. “Beautiful and terrifying. What is this power you hold over me?”

Xena smiled but her eyes burned with seriousness and passion. “I hold no power over you that you haven’t freely given me, Lao Ma. Perhaps it’s the shadows of your darker self that you see when you look at me.”

“What I see when I look at you, Xena, is desire,” Lao Ma replied with a smile, her hand trailing from the warrior’s cheek down her neck to her shoulder.

“Desire is good too,” the warrior grinned, moving in to claim waiting lips once more.

“I hope you know what you’re doing hacker,” Janice muttered, concerned, as she watched Xena and Lao Ma make their way to the mat in the center of the room.

Xero didn’t answer right away, distracted by the two soon to be lovers. At first, Xena took the lead then Lao Ma quickly turned the tables and positioned the larger woman under her. Sitting astride the warrior’s hips she slowly removed the kimono from her body, letting the silk slowly fall from her shoulders. Xena’s attention was riveted. Every movement Lao Ma made was poetry in motion, every touch perfection. Xena allowed herself to be slowly, teasingly undressed, gentled by the touch and command of the courtesan’s skill.

When the warrior cried out in rapture, the hacker allowed herself a satisfied smirk. “Who better to teach Xena about loving women than Lao Ma?” she asked. “Look at them.” Janice tried, but averted her eyes respectfully. “All Xena knows is taking. Hell, even when she’s giving, she’s taking. But here, this,” she pointed with her thumb at the passion being exchanged a few feet away. “This is about giving. She won’t catch on right away, but I think she deserves the experience. She hasn’t had an easy time of it, ya know.”

Janice glanced up at the entwined lovers without saying a word. She didn’t see it the same way Xero did. While she suspected the hacker was speaking more from personal experience than really understanding Xena, she wasn’t about to press the issue. Without realizing she was staring, she watched Lao Ma kiss her way up the warrior’s abdomen as Xena lay panting after her release. Passion’s fire hardly banked, she went after the Chinese woman with a savageness that made the archeologist uncomfortable. Lao Ma didn’t seem to mind however and seemed to be able to harness the energy of Xena’s single-minded ruthlessness and turn it to even higher levels of passion.

Under the brim of her hat she also observed the hacker watching the lovers. If she wasn’t sure of it before, she was now positive that this woman was Xena, a Xena so scarred by her own life that she blocked the memories of her soul, even the good ones. Especially the good ones.

“Which wounds cut the deepest?” Janice wondered silently. “The death of your son? Betrayal of your lover? Never getting a childhood? The blood on your hands?” Watching Xero she felt deeply and infinitely sad. “You can’t even see that this is you, can you? And whatever happens here isn’t going to be nearly as bad as what Ares throws at you. I wish I could reach you, Xena, I really do.”

“Now there’s something I’ll have to remember.”

Xero’s words intruded into Janice’s thoughts and she shook off her reverie she glanced over at the entwined bodies once more. Lao Ma was on her knees, comfortably resting on Xena’s face, head thrown back in beady abandon. Xena’s hands were resting, sort of, at Lao Ma’s hips, but she refused to look any closer. Janice waited, and watched with Xero, noting the hacker’s growing unease as the touches became more gentle.

“Why don’t you remember that instead?” Janice commented as Lao Ma trailed feather light fingertips over the warrior’s trembling body. Giving into the tender touches, Xena returned them in kind, locking souls with her teacher once more.

Finally after what felt like hours, Xena slept. All traces of hatred and rage gone from her features. Lao Ma was curled up on top of her, in the crook of one arm, head resting on the warrior’s shoulder. Janice fished in her pocket for a cigar, instinctively handing one to the hacker as well. Xero took an appreciative puff as Janice lit the cigar for her.

“Didn’t know Xena was partial to fisting,” she commented.

Janice blushed. “It was bad enough I had to watch it, hacker. If we talk about it I’m going to throw up.”

“Oh, come on,” Xero said with a playful nudge. “It’s human interaction, no big deal.”

“Yeah, but…” the archeologist protested. Changing her tactic she asked, “Have you ever had sex in public?”

The hacker shrugged. “Sure, a few times.”

“Well, imagine caring about someone so deeply that you don’t want any fragment of the experience wasted on anyone else. You want to keep it all to yourself. Just between the two of you.”

“Mel teach you that?” Xero asked.

Janice smiled. “No, we taught each other that.”

Xero’s attention was drawn back to the two women as Lao Ma woke. With an sad smile, she kissed Xena’s forehead, then moved a few feet to retrieve her kimono. Xena was just starting to stir when Borias entered the room.

In a flash, Xena was all rage and savagery once more. She attacked him on sight, beating him to a pulp.

“Xena, stop!” Lao Ma commanded. “Control yourself. He’s here because I sent for him.” Xena didn’t seem to hear, or care for that matter. “Stop, Xena!” Lao Ma continued. “Stop willing, stop desiring, stop hating.”

Xero watched as Xena stood at the crossroads. Then shut her eyes painfully when the warrior attacked Borias once more. “Lets get this over with,” she murmured to Janice as the two followed the others from the bed chamber.

Janice’s concern grew steadily as Xero seemed distracted and disinterested in the things that happened around her. She showed little to no interest as Xena and Borias stopped fighting and got

reacquainted once more. Instead her attention seemed focused on Lao Ma, who continued to gaze at Xena with profound sadness.

“She hasn’t hit rock bottom yet, has she?” the hacker finally inquired as the contestants settled down to the dice game for Xena’s ownership.

“No,” Janice confirmed. Then asking a question of her own, “Does Xena love Lao Ma?”

Xero looked thoughtful and nodded once. “For the first time in her life, she’s found someone who can see beyond the fury. Someone who sees the madness and chooses to make the journey to her soul anyway. How can you not love that?”

Janice sighed sadly. “It just all seems so twisted.”

Xero looked down at the shorter woman standing next to her and glared. “Who are you calling twisted?”

Looking up, the smile instantly vanished from the archeologist’s face.

Something had just gone seriously wrong.

“I didn’t mean anything by it, Xero. Just an expression.”

“I’ve heard it before,” Xero growled dangerously. “Twisted. Bent. Easy for you to judge, bitch, you’re dead.”

Janice backed up trying to explain. “I didn’t mean it the way you think. I’m just saying it’s all so complicated. Loving through rage, that kind of thing.” It only took an instant for Janice to realize that Xero wasn’t really seeing her, or anyone else for that matter, just a lifetime of experiences and injustices she’d have been better off without. Ming T’zu lost his bet just as Xero took her first swing at Janice.

“I’ll show you bent, you fucking cunt!” she shouted, charging at the smaller woman with unrestrained fury.

“Shit,” Janice muttered tightly and rolled out of the way.

Janice was fast, but Xero was faster and traded punches with the smaller woman as the two fought their way

across the floor, often intersecting the other combatants in the room. Mel was at Janice's side in an instant, using her equal body mass to knock the hacker to the ground. "I don't care if it is up to you to save the world," Mel seethed. "You're not touching Janice."

"Come on Mad Dog," Xero taunted, scrambling up. "You're not having her fight your battles for you?" Xero stood next to Xena as she caught her breath, oblivious to the other woman holding a sword and preparing to advance threateningly on a small child.

In that moment, she was caught in the same energy blast that threw Xena across the room. The hacker was stunned and confused as she was again picked up and thrown about the room like a rag doll. When the torrent of pain stopped at last, Xero found herself face down on the floor, unable to move. A pair of work boots entered her field of vision. She felt the painful tug on her hair as her head was lifted and she looked into Janice Covington's eyes. The anger and hatred she expected to see there was missing, instead the green eyes looked at her with love and sadness, and she heard Janice's voice drift down to her from above.

"This is rock bottom, Xero" Janice said gently.

*Tell it softly to me baby, you never meant no one no harm
Your wonderland's a mirror baby, it's swiftly fading like your charm
— Melissa Etheridge*

Chapter 7: Hard Drives & Soft Ware

Xero stirred slightly, her head shifting against the syscop's abdomen. Rielle moved, adjusting her hips and shoulders, her hand coming to rest comfortably against the top of the hacker's head. Gentle fingers stroking dark tresses coaxed the hacker to consciousness. Xero didn't bother to open her eyes. Listening with her skin as well as her ears, she felt Rielle's heartbeat quicken in her chest. Taking a moment to listen to her own body, Xero was aware of blood surging through her veins like fire. Turned on by the passion and violence she'd witnessed, Rielle's touch did nothing to quell her desire. Rather, it fueled what was burning within. Hell bent on seduction, the hacker shifted again, her shoulder rubbing against juncture of Rielle's thighs. As she'd hoped, a slight gasp and shudder were audible. With a the faintest hint of a smile, Xero stilled her body, leaving her shoulder where it was. Let the syscop think she'd drifted back off to sleep--she could be very patient when motivated.

Waiting, listening, the hacker contemplated the heartbeats she heard, enjoying the warmth of the syscop's body beneath her cheek. Breathing easily, she focused on the scent of the smaller woman's skin. Water was the first image that came to mind. Clean spring water. Rielle smelled like spring. She could pick up the faint traces of the herbal soap at Henry's house and the smell of leather coming from her own jacket that Rielle still wore. Leather did something for Xero, a powerful something.

Moving her head slowly, she brushed her cheek against the silk shirt covering Rielle's abdomen. She could feel rock hard muscles twitch and move. The fingers that gently touched her hair didn't still; rather they continued their gentle assault. "Xero, are you awake?" Rielle whispered.

The hacker turned onto her stomach, nudging the syscop's center one more time in the process. Dragging her chin across taut muscles she slowly brought her eyes up. Gazing up the length of Rielle's body to vibrant green eyes, she whispered one word in response. "Yes."

The syscop swallowed visibly, her body tense, heartbeat fast. The hacker ignored the signals of fear and lowered her face, slowly nuzzling the smaller woman's flat stomach. With practiced slowness she brought her body up the length of Rielle's until she was gazing down into those sparkling green eyes once more. As she's hoped, she saw two emotions warring for dominance in those eyes: desire and fear. Xero enjoyed both. "If I try to kiss you, are you going to bite me?" she purred seductively.

Rielle smiled, feigning a bravado she clearly didn't feel. "You're going to have to find out."

Xero smiled. A lazy tongue slipped out and moistened Xero's lips. "Maybe not," she whispered.

"Chicken," Rielle gasped back.

Xero lowered her head slowly, so slowly that Rielle was sure she'd scream in frustration. At the last possible moment she avoided the syscop's lips and brought her mouth to rest on Rielle's neck, just below her ear. With infinite care she nibbled, licked and kissed a fiery path down the syscop's neck. When she lifted her face once more, it was Rielle's mouth that sought out hers, crushing against her in a soulful kiss.

The hacker didn't disappoint. With deliberate care Xero sought out the secrets of the smaller woman's mouth. Almost too gentle, she teased the tongue and lips of her companion, making her whimper with need and shudder with desire.

"Is this what you want?" she murmured softly, her lips making another descent down the column of the syscop's throat.

"Yes," Rielle panted as the hacker's teeth toyed with the top button of her blouse.

"Why?" she asked teasingly. "Because I'm a hacker?" Button conquered, she slowly drew her tongue across the exposed flesh, making Rielle jump.

"No," the syscop managed as she felt a strong hand slide up the outside of her leg. "Just you," she finally stammered.

If Xero had been listening for even a moment, the words would have touched her. Two words she'd never heard in her life, but they were missed in her singled minded pursuit of surrender.

Lifting herself up on her hands, she hovered over the syscop's body for a moment. Rielle's gaze was riveted on the piercing blue of Xero's eyes as she drew her hands up muscular forearms and bulging biceps to tangle in the hacker's dark hair. "You're not playing games with me are you Rielle?" Xero asked gently. While it was just a line, designed to put responsibility for whatever followed on her partner, a part of her was genuinely interested in the response.

There was no faking the desire thrumming through her veins or the delight she was experiencing in each quiver, each noise the other woman made. Xero's enjoyment was completely real, even if her sentiment was bullshit.

"No, no games," Rielle husked, drawing the hacker's face down once more.

"*Up yours, Paula,*" she thought before engulfing Rielle's mouth in a passionate onslaught. Wrapping one arm around the syscop's waist, and the other behind her neck, Xero moved back never breaking the contact of their kiss.

First drawing the smaller woman up as she made it to her knees, she brought Rielle's hips up to straddle her lap as she sat back. Keeping a strong arm wrapped around Rielle for support, she brought the hand from behind her neck to her blouse to continue the assault on the buttons of the black silk garment.

"You smell fantastic," Xero murmured truthfully as lips began to devour exposed skin. Rielle smiled, throwing her head back in pleasure, fingers tangled in soft, black hair, holding Xero close.

"Yes," she breathed when the hacker's questing mouth found a grateful breast. Xero luxuriated in the sensation of soft skin moving beneath her lips and teeth. While it had been some time since she'd enjoyed this type of intimacy with anyone, that alone didn't quite explain the fiery rush that shot through her.

She undid the rest of the buttons with her free hand as her mouth trailed across Rielle's chest to the other breast. Using just her lips at first, then teeth and tongue she smiled as the syscop groaned, forcing more and more of herself into the hacker's welcoming mouth.

"God, Xero," she panted, "this is so...so good."

"*Better than your wife?*" Xero thought to herself with a wicked grin. She might be bent, but she could be an amazing fuck when she wanted to be. "More," she mumbled against Rielle's skin. "You're so beautiful, gotta have more."

Carefully, gently, she trailed her blunt nails across the skin of the syscop's back under her blouse as squeezed a firm hip with her other hand. The signal was clear. Xero wanted more skin.

If Rielle wanted to take the opportunity to slow down, to think about what was happening, she didn't get it. Xero fell backwards on the couch, bringing Rielle with her as she stretched her legs out. Filled with the sight of the turned on hacker writhing beneath her, Rielle smiled all too happy to claim hungry lips once more. She was hardly aware of her jeans coming off until she felt hot hands

running up and down the sides of her legs. Grateful she still wore her blouse, open as it was, and the leather jacket, she didn't feel nearly as exposed and vulnerable as if she'd been completely nude.

Squeezing firm hips through the fabric of her underwear, Xero's hands were strong, but soft and gentle at the same time. Rielle found it distracting. It was nothing however, compared to the heated words whispered with ragged urgency.

"Rielle, please," Xero savagely whispered, "let me fuck you."

The rawness of the language and emotion behind it renewed the syscop's fear as well as heightening her arousal. She couldn't find the voice to answer, only nod slightly. With a huge grin on her face, Xero brought Rielle down for another deep kiss as the two of them worked together to remove the offending piece of clothing. Mission accomplished, Xero slowly drew her fingertips up the length of Rielle's thighs, guiding the smaller woman's body forward.

Rielle settled herself, kneeling on either side of the hacker's face as Xero's eyes shined up at her brightly. Even from this position of power, Rielle couldn't help but feel a bit intimidated by the woman nestled beneath her. Strong hands guided the syscop's hips where the hacker wanted them. Taking a few moments to simply enjoy the view up Rielle's body, Xero let her hands wander. She touched soft skin, firm muscle and nipples erect from arousal. Finally she drew her attention lower, to the soft down and aching body just beyond her mouth. She brought her hands down, to touch Rielle gently, almost reverently.

The syscop gasped at the contact, fighting her instinctive desire to crush her body against the mouth that was making her wait. "You're incredible," Xero murmured, locking eyes with Rielle once more. "Thank you for this." With that she claimed Rielle, making her sob audibly.

"Oh god," she murmured over and over.

Using strong hands to guide and support the smaller woman's body, Xero took her time. With a slow assault against the other woman's senses she licked and sucked as if she had all the time in the world. After long minutes the repeated chant of "oh god" had changed to "fuck yes" and inwardly the hacker beamed.

As Rielle neared her climax, riding Xero's mouth in a steady rhythm, the door opened and two figures entered.

"Xero, the bar's closed and... oh my god," Blue gasped in stunned amazement. The sight of Xero, fully dressed, reclined on the couch against the far wall of the room with Rielle, naked from the waist down moving rhythmically over the hacker's face was unexpected to say the least.

"Holy fuck," Ska chimed in at her side. Both women could only see Xero's dark hair as it spilled over the end of the couch and Rielle's back as she moved up and down.

Too taken with the demands of her own body, Rielle either didn't notice or didn't care about the intrusion. Xero did notice however, and waved them away with one hand. It took Blue a moment to notice the signal, too stunned by what she was watching. Finally catching on, she began to back through the doorway, reemerging a moment later to drag Ska bodily from the room.

Refocusing her efforts, Xero provided the attention needed to send Rielle's muscular body into a torrent of spasms and quivers. "Yesssss," she groaned as the wave of her release washed over.

Xero was distracted by Rielle's release. It gratified her in a way that was unsettling. That made her think of Xena, which made her think of power, which brought her thoughts back to Paula. With shaking fury, she lashed out at the woman who thought she was better than Xero, and more deserving of Rielle.

With trembling hands, Xero guided her fingers over the syscop's back. Rielle, just regaining control of her body from the power of her orgasm, found herself responding once more. Disappointed that she wasn't touching the statuesque hacker in turn, she put that thought aside as her body sang out again, demanding release.

Xero teased with her chin, grinning up at her like a kid at Christmas. "Don't make me stop," she whispered, consuming Rielle once more. The second wave hit her, every bit as strong as the first. Her hip began to cramp just Xero shifted, laying Rielle lengthwise on the couch.

"Please," Rielle panted, "lemme rest," as warm fingers began to playfully tease at her core.

“Is that what you really want?” Xero asked, her voice rumbly and soft even as her fingers continued to touch.

“Oh god,” Rielle gasped as two fingers made their way in. Coherent thought was washed away bright colors danced before her eyes. Xero’s touch wasn’t demanding or forceful, but there was an insistence about it that wouldn’t be denied. Again and again Rielle came, each time feeling a bit more out of control, and more distant from her partner.

“Xero, please. Hold on a minute,” she said clearly. A little concerned at the hacker’s failure to respond she tried again. “Xero, stop. Lemme rest.”

Concern led to panic as she called Xero’s name and got no response. The sensual touches continued, only now they felt more like an assault. “Xero, I mean it. Get the fuck off of me!” she demanded, trying to force the hacker away from her breast to no avail. Finally, she shoved with her hips as if she wanted to raise her legs to better feel what her lover was doing.

Xero backed off a little, only to find a foot solidly meeting with her chest, shoving her off the couch. “What?!” she demanded eyes blazing.

“Are you fucking insane?” Rielle shouted, angry as she grabbed for her jeans, not bothering with her underwear.

“What?” Xero asked again, clearly baffled. “Suddenly remember you’re married?” she demanded acidly.

Insight sank in as Rielle furiously buttoned her blouse and fought back tears. “Xero, were you fucking me? Or fucking over Paula?”

Without waiting for an answer she stormed from the room. Right into the midst of the assembled hackers.

Rielle hesitated for only a fraction of a second before marching to the door on the far side of the bar. Xero stopped in the doorway, the eyes of eleven curious hackers watching her intently.

With the briefest glance at the women assembled, Xero called out to her lover. “Rielle, wait.” The syscop ignored her and had gotten as far as the bar’s entrance. “Please,” Xero tried again. “Don’t go.”

Several jaws around the room dropped as hackers stared at Xero as if she were mad. Rielle froze in her tracks, but didn’t turn around.

“Why?” she asked quietly, her voice strong.

Distracted, Xero ran an unconscious hand through her hair, blue eyes focused on Rielle’s back. “You know I can’t solve this Ares thing without you,” she said flatly. “It seems to be important to you.”

Rielle took a deep breath and turned around. Her eyes were red, but she wasn’t crying. With a nod she walked back to the table where everyone but she and Xero was seated. “Fine.” The tone of her voice spoke volumes to everyone in the room.

Absently Xero wiped her face with the back of her hand. Blue looked at her disgusted. “For God’s sake, Xero, go wash your face.”

With a slight nod, she turned and headed for the bathroom. No one said anything until the hacker got back. Rielle could feel the eyes of all assembled stealing glimpses of her. But to her surprise, the looks were not hostile. Rather they were respectful and almost admiring.

Blue nudged Ska and looked pointedly at the back of the bar towards the kitchen. “Wasn’t there some surprise you were working on?” she asked quietly.

“What?” the waitress shot back, perplexed. “Oh! The food. Good thinking.” Hurriedly she got up and drafted a couple of willing volunteers to help.

Xero returned shortly thereafter and took a seat at the opposite side of the table from the syscop. “Okay,” she grumbled without preamble, “where are we?”

Jenbob cautiously glanced at Rielle before answering. “Ska’s fixing some breakfast, MaryD and TrueNorth are helping her. We’ve been here for a couple of hours you know.”

The hacker took a deep breath and nodded. “Anyone have a chance to dissect Bat’s hard drive?”

“I took it to Shadow,” Trillbaby replied. “She says it’s beyond New Tech. Totally state of the art. The Pipeline project wasn’t supposed to be nearly that far along.”

“How do you mean?” Wordee asked, grateful for a topic of conversation that didn’t involve the two women seated at the table who were glaring at each other.

“Shadow says that for this Ares thing to be run from outside the system all commands would have to be programmed ahead of time. The thing runs too fast to be jockeyed from outside.” Trillbaby explained.

“But that would mean whoever it was would know exactly what Bat would do. We saw on her drive that she tried to disconnect a number of times,” a new voice chimed in across from across the table.

“Lunacy is right,” Blue agreed. “Bat might have been sloppy about some things, but not when it came to getting out of trouble.”

“But if that’s true,” Xero countered, making sure all in attendance were listening. “Then this Ares entity is operating from inside the system. It doesn’t have an outside source we can simply disconnect.”

Rielle smiled slightly. This was something the hackers needed to understand and Xero had found the way to make the point without bringing up things like ‘godhood’.

“So it really is a virus?” Ska asked, as she brought several steaming plates of food to the table, and began to place them in front of the hungry hackers.

“Maybe it’s a new syscop technology,” Robin ventured. “It would give them an edge...”

“But syscops don’t work that way,” TrueNorth protested, setting down the plates she carried as well. “Their only alliance is to their company, and this thing smells like government.”

“That isn’t exactly true,” Rielle countered. “Before their loyalty to the company they work for there are federal statutes that come first. There are enough federal watch dogs to make sure syscops protect the statutes before company interests.” Picking up her fork she absently began to eat the breakfast handed her. A few moments later she realized no one else had spoken. Looking up she realized that twelve pairs of eyes were staring at her. Xero’s expression was clear. It smacked of *‘you’ve really stepped in it now.’*

“How, *exactly* do you know that?” Delirium asked, her voice calm.

Rielle shrugged and scooped up another forkful of food. “I’ve been a syscop for eight years,” she said before popping the fork into her mouth. “These eggs are really delicious.”

Xero rolled her eyes and shook her head. Hell was breaking loose.

“You brought a syscop *to the ‘horn,*” Delirium demanded hotly.

“Are you *nuts?*” Jenbob added around a mouthful of food.

“She’s a syscop?” Robin uttered, absolutely stunned.

“Rielle contacted me the day Bat got unsubbed, telling me she thought something would happen. We’ve been working together to try to get to the bottom of this,” Xero explained.

“I’ll say,” Ska muttered then stifled an “ouch!” as Blue kicked her in the shin under the table.

“And how exactly did a syscop find the ever elusive Xero?” Lunacy demanded.

Xero shrugged. “She tapped me online while I was doing a job.”

At that point several women laughed shaking their heads in disbelief. “Inconceivable,” Wordee muttered. “The Princess Bride, 1987.”

Rielle slammed her fork down loudly. All eyes turned back to her. “Xero uses seventeen different encryption programs, but not randomly. Encryption and retrieval set ups are determined by the number of computer outlets at the location where she’s hacking. She usually moves in during a back up session and waits until the lag between backup and verification to tag her data. Most of her programs are written in Torvek although she prefers Aldon for overseas jobs. She’s difficult to catch because she goes after anything and everything.”

Shining green eyes scanned the table. “Blue is a specialist. Most notable in medical research heists, syscops tend to leave her alone since she generally goes after the bad guys anyway. Jenbob is difficult to trace since the hardware she uses is so antiquated. With custom software she’s able to get the job done surprisingly quickly, leaving a trail so messy syscops with seniority won’t go near it.

“Wordee specializes in Entertainment heists. She’s known for making improvements in projects, most notably dialogue, before the stolen work gets to it’s buyer...”

“I think they get the point, Rielle,” Xero growled as the assembled hackers sat looking dumbfounded. In a few sentences she’d just exposed the elite of the hacking world as simple technicians.

“So this thing is just a ruse to grab some collars?” Ska asked, reaching into her pocket.

“Don’t bother with the knife, Ska,” Rielle warned. “As I originally told Xero, I have no intentions of arresting anyone. I’m not technically a syscop at this point. I’ve been on a leave of absence, vacation, and most recently committed to a psych ward. If I were to show up at Archive now, I’d be locked up as fast as any of you.

“Forgive my asking,” Robin said calmly from her seat next to Wordee, “but why should we believe you?”

Rielle shrugged. “Because I’m rich, and married.” All eyes instantly shot between the syscop and Xero. “Not to Xero, obviously.”

The hacker couldn’t believe it. The trump card she had to hold against Rielle had just become useless because Rielle had just given it to everyone else. Marriages were easy to come by. Quick, efficient and with expiration dates if you wanted. Along with the convenience of temporary commitment came a stiff penalty for people who would violate such contracts. It was one thing to joke about sleeping with a married woman, but no one usually believed it because married people didn’t cheat. Not if they didn’t want to lose everything they owned should they be caught.

Everyone in the room had a shot at successful blackmail should Rielle want to hold on to her possessions. Everyone could ruin her financially with a simple phone call to the syscop’s wife. The hackers were impressed.

Casually, Ska got up from her chair and walked over to Rielle. “Between you and me, you’re too good for Xero. Want some more eggs?”

At that the room breathed a collective sigh of relief. All except for Xero, who at this point was inclined to believe the waitress. The hackers ate in silence, broken occasionally by the rave reviews for Ska and TrueNorth’s cooking.

“You know,” Ska explained. “Not everything sucks with the net being down. Managed to confuse the delivery truck. Seems we got a crate of real eggs and ground coffee that was destined for the Beverly Hills Hotel.”

“These eggs are real?” Trillbaby gasped, not having touched hers yet. “I thought they were soy.” In moments, everyone started clamoring for seconds. Fresh brewed coffee followed and before long, even Xero’s icy mood warmed somewhat.

“So how are we going to fight this Ares thing?” Vada asked, with both hands wrapped around a steaming mug.

“We have to get in the system and fight it there,” Xero explained. “I’ve given that some thought. I think what we need is a virtual reality tank.”

“Full sized?” Jenbob asked, jaw dropping once more. “With oxygenated gel? Where are we gonna steal something that big?”

“Jenbob’s right,” Blue agreed. “You can’t move those systems around, too touchy.”

“And there’s only a few high end ones in the country,” Lunacy added.

“I know,” the blue eyed hacker agreed. “If the tank can’t come to us, then we go to it. The best virtual tank system in the country is right in our own back yard.”

“You can’t mean military?” Ska asked. “They’re in on this mess?”

Rielle’s eyes widened in understanding. “No, she means... Disneyland?”

Xero smiled.

“Hackers take the theme park, this’ll be good,” Ska quipped with a laugh.

The hackers and Rielle spent the next several hours working out a plan to get into the theme park and capture a virtual reality tank. For the moment it seemed that the syscop had been accepted as one of their own as the women argued back and forth over how best to proceed. Frequently she

and Xero stood on opposite sides of disagreements as to how best to proceed which the hacker found frustrating.

“I still say Missy should coordinate the efforts to guard the perimeter of the park,” Lunacy suggested for the third time. To everyone’s surprise, both Xero and Rielle shook their heads.

“We’ll have LN and Amazon Julie do that at the park,” Xero countered. “We need Missy here coordinating the stuff with Shadow.”

“She’s too recognizable,” Rielle added. “There will be Disney security there as well as syscops. Trust me, Missy would be recognized.”

Xero nodded again. “Rielle is right. Listen, I asked Shadow to try and get a word through to the President--where are we on that?”

“We don’t know,” Wordee explained. “Message seems to have gotten through, but we can’t tell if she read it, trashed it, or is planning to squash us.”

“When we start closing off systems in the park, it’s my guess the National Guard will be called out. We’ve got to let her know what’s up, not what we’re planning, but that we’re planning *something*. Maybe when the time comes she’ll ask the Guard not to blow us to kingdom come.” Xero ran her hand through her hair once again and looked at her watch.

“I’ll keep on that,” Jenbob offered.

“Good,” Xero agreed, standing. It was clear she was restless, as they all were. Assembled in one group, they were taking risks, big risks and they knew it. Pacing back and forth, the tall woman tried to wrap things up.

“How are we going to keep the employees out of the park?” Ska asked. “We’re talking maintenance crews of around thirty thousand.”

“It’s going to be risky, but we’ll have to get onto the nets and send out work cancellation messages. It isn’t that unusual for shifts to be rescheduled. As long as individual crew members don’t talk about it too much to each other, I doubt they’d suspect,” Rielle reasoned.

“It’s a good plan except for the risk,” Blue added. “If it comes to logging on to the general nets, I nominate Xero as guinea pig.”

All eyes turned to the hacker at the end of the table who glared back at Blue with open hostility.

“I’ll handle the notices,” Rielle said in a tone that would brook no argument. “Xero is getting into the VR tank, she’s already doing her part.”

“You’re not getting on the nets, Rielle.” Xero growled. “Don’t think Ares hasn’t figured out your little part in this by now.”

“I’m missing something here,” Robin observed.

Rielle turned her gaze to the hackers seated around the table, making eye contact with each one. “When Xero and I left after the wake, we went to Bat’s ex-husband’s house. Xero logged on using a Ronin workstation and nearly got fried in the process.”

“Holy shit,” a couple of the hacker’s breathed.

“It sounds weird,” Rielle continued. “But the thing is looking for her. Specifically.”

“With Xero’s ego, that isn’t surprising,” Ska quipped. “I’m sure we can work out the specifics of who logs on for what later. If you split it up evenly, everyone’s taking the same risks, agreed?”

The hackers looked around the table at each other before nodding their heads, making the vote unanimous.

“We’ve got someone making reservations for everyone at the hotel,” Xero continued. “We’ll head over there tomorrow morning. We’ll need the rest of the day to get in touch with everyone.” She stopped to write something down on a napkin and handed it to Ska. “Here’s the address of a car we can use. Have someone go pick it up. We’ll scope out Disney’s system tomorrow night, but won’t make our move on the park until Friday. That should allow more time to get word through to Taborn if she’s listening. In the meantime, keep your mobie units charged and on. That’s going to be our only mode of communication. Do we have enough cash to cover all of this?”

Delirium nodded. “We’ve got some cash here and the money from Bat’s vault. There was

some left after the wake. If people share rooms we should be able to handle everything.”

Xero was about to dismiss everyone when Blue spoke up. “If you don’t mind my asking, Rielle, what are you going to do?”

The syscop smiled. The hackers were cautious, she couldn’t blame them. “I honestly didn’t have anything in mind. I’d be happy to accompany anyone who needs help...if you’re worried about me calling Syscop Central.”

A few people laughed at that and some others smiled. Rielle was treating them with respect. Hackers ate that up. As the group broke up and people began to leave, MaryD walked up to the tall brooding hacker.

“What are you going to do, Xero?” she asked.

“If we’re lucky, she’ll crawl under a rock,” Blue shot back under her breath.

While Xero never really thought of these people as her friends, she had grown accustomed to a certain amount of professional respect. That seemed to have been replaced by the Rielle MacGab fan club mantra, *Xero Sucks*.

“I’ve got stuff to do,” she answered calmly, then glanced at Rielle. “Can I have my jacket back?”

Rielle looked down at the black leather jacket she still wore. For some reason she couldn’t bear the thought of parting with it. While things between her and the hacker were a mess, it was the only tangible bit of evidence that there was in fact something between her and the hacker. “No,” she refused. “Consider it payment for services rendered.”

“Just who was servicing who?” Xero shot back hotly.

“That’s what I’d like to know,” Rielle replied, then turned and walked out the front door.

Rielle waited outside for the other hackers to join her, leaving Xero alone in the Pub. Several women broke off into smaller teams to tackle their assigned tasks. Rielle joined Blue, Ska, and Jenbob as they headed for Blue’s car. “Got any ideas?” Blue asked as she opened her passenger door for Rielle and Ska.

The waitress crawled into the back seat of the ‘40 Camero grumbling, as Rielle settled herself in the passenger seat. “If we head to Studio City I’ve got an idea about contacting the Disney employees safely.”

Blue exchanged glances with Ska and Jenbob in her rearview mirror. Hacker and waitress shrugged indifferently; they didn’t have any better ideas. Following Rielle’s directions, Blue drove them to a small building off Laurel Canyon just past Ventura Boulevard.

“So what’s this?” Blue asked as she and the others got out of the small red car.

“It’s an Archive automated switching station,” Rielle explained. “If we can get inside, I we can use the automated retrieval system to send the messages.”

“Say no more,” Ska assured her with a grin. Taking her knife from her back pocket, she wedged the blade in between the security panel and the door. Popping it off, she then adjusted several wires, causing the door to open silently.

“I can see why the hackers keep you around,” Rielle observed as she took something from her purse. Easing her way inside, she made sure the building was vacant before waving the others in.

“Shit! She’s packing a gun,” Ska exclaimed noticing the small high-powered taser in the syscop’s hand.

“Would you be quiet, Ska?” Rielle demanded with a hiss. “There could be maintenance crews lurking around. Come on, we need to get to the switch nodes.”

“Fancy equipment,” Jenbob commented, looking at the rows and rows of data banks that lined the walls of the building. “Redundant back-ups, fast processors, and serial channel switching--not too hard to hack.”

Rielle smirked. “I’m glad you think so. Half of these data banks are for recording not processing. Archive has an entire department of set up to simply watch hackers hack and then incorporate capture systems and defense codes into their networks.”

“No shit!” Ska breathed, impressed.

“Here are the switch nodes,” Rielle announced when they made their way to the center of the small building. Taking a seat at a readout station, Rielle selected a control panel and smoothly popped the plastic covering from the console.

“Is this the main artery?” Blue asked taking a small palm-top unit from her pocket.

“Yes,” the syscop answered pulling a couple of cables from the rest. Unplugging one, she handed it to the hacker who inserted it into the back of her unit. A series of symbols appeared simultaneously on the console monitor as well as the palm-top screen. As the hacker worked, keying information into her unit and watching the screen intently, Rielle looked around the room until she found the maintenance log. She read through the entries and checked her watch.

“Okay,” Rielle announced. “Crack the Disney database and see how many third shift workers are scheduled tomorrow. You can set up the palm top to pass through the message. Since this is an automated station, it’ll send one message after the next until the list is finished. We’ve got about forty minutes until the maintenance crew is due.”

Blue nodded without saying a word, her finger flying over the keys. Her brow furrowed in concentration she worked carefully and quickly searching for the right database and setting up subroutines to notify the employees. After about twenty minutes of careful work, she unhooked the cable from her palmtop and reattached the wires. “That should do it,” the hacker announced, running an absent hand through her short salt and peppered hair. “It’ll take about fifteen minutes to get through the list, scrambling after each one.”

“I guess that should take care of it then,” Rielle replied with a smile. “So, what’s next on our agenda?”

Jenbob and Blue looked nervously at each other. “Well,” Blue began. “There are some people who haven’t been on the nets we should be contacting. Hackers that are offline but we could really use their help for this heist. A few are in the area and we can drop by in person.”

“But?” Rielle prompted sensing the hacker’s unease. Then with another grin she caught on. “You’re torn between babysitting me and bringing a known syscop into the homes of semi-retired hackers.”

“That would about sum it up,” Ska concurred brightly.

“This sounds weird to say,” Jenbob allowed. “But for a syscop you seem like a decent person. I mean...”

“How about this,” Rielle suggested amused at the situation. “You can drop me off at the psych unit because I need to check in on my wife. When I’m done there, I’ll swing by Xero’s and have a look around, to see if Helms’ camp is still interested in her place. I’ll grab some fresh clothes for her and meet you guys back at the ‘Horn. Here’s my mobie unit code. If you want to reach me just buzz. You can trace the signal to see if I am where I said I’d be.”

“For a syscop, she’s pretty quick,” Ska observed, smiling broadly at the others.

After a quick wave, the red Camero sped out of sight leaving Rielle MacGab outside the Westwood PsychTech Medical Building. It didn’t take long to obtain a visitation pass and be escorted to a waiting room. Minutes later, her wife was ushered inside. Rielle noticed that in the standard issue medical sweat suit Paula James looked as rumpled as Xero had the night she’d shown up at her door before Bat’s wake. Dark circles under her eyes and unkempt hair made it clear she’d done much venting and no sleeping.

“You’ve got a lot of nerve coming here,” Paula seethed as soon as the orderly departed. Rielle took a deep breath and waited. She had this coming, not that the knowledge would make it any more pleasant. “I take it you’re here to have me released?” she asked a bit uncertainly when Rielle sat down and made herself comfortable in a visiting room chair.

“No, I’m not here to get you out. I don’t have that authority. I’m here to make sure you’re okay--and to apologize for what’s happened.” Rielle’s voice was kind and calm, trying not to push the angered woman.

“I’ll soak you for every fucking penny, Rielle,” Paula seethed. “It’s bad enough you lie about getting over your Gabrielle infatuation, it’s bad enough you take up with some hacker you’ve been

stalking, but to do that and then send that thug after me when I'm only trying to help you--"

"By having me committed," Rielle added.

"Yes," Paula agreed. "By having you committed. You *need* to be committed, Rielle. You're going too far. If you don't get me out of here within the hour, I swear I'll take you for every penny. I'm not joking. We're married. That still means something. You fuck up like this within the confines of a contract and it costs you big time. It's going to cost you and it's going to cost her."

"Is that your big worry, Paula? How much can you make from this failed deal?" Rielle shook her head sadly.

"It's all I'm left with!" the dark haired woman shouted. "How can I compete with the little fantasy you've created for yourself? I tried to love you and succeeded at that for a good two years before this shit happened. It's been clear for a while you don't love me, I'm wondering now if you ever did."

"I tried," Rielle whispered sadly. "I really tried. But I didn't know what was missing until I found it."

Paula fought back against angry tears as Rielle waited, her own gut wrenching in regret for the pain she'd caused. "I hope you remember this a long time, Rielle." Paula warned. "Because it isn't over between us. I'm not out of your life and I'm most certainly not out of your fucking hacker's life."

The syscop's eyes narrowed slightly. "This is between me and you, Paula. Leave Xero out of it."

"Oh no. It became a threesome the second she entered the picture. If you drop her now, and get some help and work with me-- we can rebuild 'us'. If you don't-- if you walk out of here and join her, then I swear I will destroy that bitch until there is nothing left."

"What you're destroying," Rielle replied calmly, "is any hope of a reconciliation. I can understand your hurt, I can understand your anger at me, and I can even understand your anger at Xero. But vengeance is different. You can't bully me into feeling something I don't. I'm sorry, Paula but you can't--but that's what you're trying to do." Standing in one fluid motion, Rielle headed for the door. "The hold says you've got two days left in here. By the time you're out, my task will be finished and we'll be able to sort out 'us'."

Paula stood and tried to block the door. She was met by two orderlies who restrained her. "I swear, Rielle, you haven't heard the last of this. I *will* get out and when I do that hacker of yours is dead meat!"

Stinging tears came to the syscop's eyes as she hurried down the hall, away from the visitation room. Knowing she was doing the right thing in helping the disagreeable hacker didn't make the hurt she caused her wife any easier. Her thoughts on the bus back to Topanga were a clouded collage of memories. There had been good times with Paula, certainly, but she also remembered the bad times. The times that reminded her that the Marketing VP was not the other half of her soul. Not her destiny.

Her thoughts drifted then to Xero, the woman she was convinced was Xena. The rude, abrasive, manipulative thug who had used her hours before. She laughed bitterly to keep from crying, the irony was too perfect. She was turning her back on a woman who truly loved her she stood by a hacker who clearly did not. "This is as bad as C'hin," she mumbled, marveling at how she had a knack for finding herself in difficult situations.

Rielle stopped several blocks away from Xero's apartment building. Composing her thoughts, she adjusted her sunglasses and easily, seamlessly shifted into 'syscop mode'. The coast was clear and no official vehicles were parked on either side of the narrow rustic street. She checked the charge on her taser and ran a hand through her strawberry blond hair. With confident steps, she approached the front of the building. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, no sign that someone had died here less than a fortnight ago. She rode the elevator to the third floor and stepped out. Turning down the hall, she walked to the end, to the hacker's apartment. The door was closed, a security seal locking the door in place. Not having the expertise at break-ins possessed by a certain

fifteen-year-old waitress, Rielle took out her Archive security badge. Hoping for the best, she swiped it through the reader. Holding her breath, she wondered a moment if her clearance status had been revoked. She was about to give up when the light glowed green and with a 'click' the door unlocked.

Shutting the door behind her, Rielle entered the apartment. Things looked very much as they had when she'd been there before. Certainly, the body had been removed, but the couch was still in the same place, now with a stain showing where Bat's remains had been. Turning away from such grisly reminders, she moved into the living room, navigating the obstacle course of computer cases and wires strewn around the floor.

It was clear that the inhabitants of the apartment had spent most of their time in the living room, either working on one of the workstations present, lounging or eating. A large trash can near the main entertainment console had a collection of empty Pepsi cans and pizza boxes. Other than the equipment and the couch, the room was sparsely furnished. A doorway through the main room led to a bathroom. It was small, had all the essentials and was neat yet spartan. The hallway opened up on each side into a private bedroom. Rielle stepped into the closest one, deciding instantly that it did not belong to Xero.

The room was fairly well furnished with a bed, dresser and chest of drawers as well as a modular work table. What was most striking about the room was the fact that so little wall space remained uncovered. Movie posters, photos and other graphic prints literally covered the walls and ceiling of the small room. The deceased hacker was clearly a fan of movies and other forms of entertainment. Two framed posters dominated the wall space across from the bed. One was the blurry image of a flying saucer with the words "I Want To Believe" printed below. The other was a large advertisement for an X-Files Movie. "Trust No One, We Mean It: X-Files 17" was printed in holographic letters over a series of photo montages from the film. Curiously, Rielle looked around the room, trying to piece together what Xero's business partner had been like. One drawer in the dresser was filled with minidisks, each one labeled in some kind of code. The other drawers contained clothes, which were more or less folded. Her tastes appeared fun loving and upbeat if not a bit mismatched.

A small medical bag was open on the dresser. Upon closer investigation, Rielle could see that it was a maintenance kit for the deceased woman's mechanical eye. Small tools as well as a variety of medicated solutions were positioned neatly in their respective compartments in the kit. A trading card, in an elaborate frame was positioned behind the medical kit. Rielle blinked in surprise, while she wasn't much of a collector herself, she well knew the value of pre-plague items. This was a promotional trading card from the very first X-Files movie. The two main characters were featured with the words "The X Files: Fight The Future" printed below. Turning the frame over there was a hologram of authenticity for the card and the date: June 1998. There was also a hand written inscription along the edge of the frame that read, "*Sorry about the other day, that crap had nothing to do with you. I mean it. -- Xero*".

"Quite a gift for an apology, Xero," Rielle muttered as she continued to look around the room.

Deciding that there really wasn't anything to be discovered in the dead hacker's room, Rielle headed across the hall to Xero's. Upon entering, the contrast was striking. The bed consisted of a mattress in the corner, neatly made with clean sheets. The room was well lit with sunlight streaming in from the window across from the bed. Walking over to it, she could see some trees and a walkway three stories down. The furniture consisted largely of used shipping crates, durable plastic boxes that stacked neatly on top of one another. A compact, yet powerful net retrieval system was set up on a small work desk, clearly a unit used for checking the news nets and daily business. The setup in the living room was clearly for hacking; designed to be set up or taken down and concealed quickly. This unit in the bedroom was obviously for legitimate uses. Rielle sat down at Xero's chair and did a quick scan of her databases. Calling up frequently visited net nodes and the most recently accessed data, Rielle fought back guilt at going through the other woman's files. Instead, she focused on the purpose for it--to see if there had been any other intruders besides herself. She checked the time stamps on the various files, noting that if anyone had gone through the system they'd been careful

about it.

Pushing away from the desk, Rielle surveyed the room. There weren't many personal effects present on the few shelves in the room. An old battered ID chip, the kind that would be pinned to a young child's clothing, a scented candle in a blown glass candle holder, a ceramic bowl containing some loose credit slips, and a vintage bottle of wine. Deciding not to invade the hacker's privacy further, she decided to pick up some clothes for the other woman and head back to the 'Horn. She found a small duffel bag near one of the crates and emptied it of its contents, some tools and drives, most likely from an onsite job. Opening the first storage crate she sorted through the clothes selecting two different pairs of jeans. One blue and faded, the other grey and fairly new. The same crate contained an assortment of t-shirts. Her eyes landed on a plain grey, one. It was soft to the touch and Rielle smiled, picking it up. It still smelled faintly of fabric softener and the hacker making the syscop's head swim. She also chose a black tshirt, this one with an ornate design from the Hard Rock Cafe. Moving over to another crate she opened it, blushing first at some of the more intimate objects contained therein. Moving the aforementioned toys to the side, she then grabbed three pairs of socks and three pairs of underwear. A black pair instantly caught her eye, the cut of the garment and silky fabric making her smile. She also selected a green pair and finally a pair that was bright red. "Might as well give her a choice," she muttered.

Before she could zip up the small duffel, Rielle heard the unmistakable click of the front door opening. In an instant she scanned the interior of the room. Already standing near the bedroom window, her first impulse was to duck outside, but as there was no balcony, it was out of the question. The closet was on the far side of the room and she wouldn't have time to duck inside. Setting the duffel carefully down on the mattress, she silently dropped to the floor, pressing herself against the bed.

"I'm inside," a male voice announced from the living room. "The lock wasn't jammed and the place seems quiet. You sure your contact had the right apartment?" the voice continued after a pause. Most likely talking on a mobie unit, Rielle decided. "I'm checking the main systems now, they're clean. I'll check the ones in the bedroom next."

Rielle took a very slow and careful breath. Almost willing her consciousness out of her body, she remained still. Not so much as darting her eyes to the door when she heard the man enter, she simply observed the movement from her peripheral vision.

"I'm at the other machine," he announced, sitting in Xero's chair. "The drive is warm on this one," he continued, getting up cautiously. "But this thing could be hooked up for remote retrieval. I tell you, Mr. Ares, I haven't seen anyone. Yes sir, I'll check there now sir."

Rielle heard the man cautiously step toward the closet and ease the door open, then the sound of movement as he spun towards the opening, most likely with a weapon drawn.

"Damn," Rielle thought to herself. Forcing herself to breathe slowly, she took a couple of careful lungfuls of air. Gradually coiling her muscles, she readied her body, easing upward. Then there, over the edge of the bed, she could see him. Mobie earpiece attached to his ear, taser drawn, he was watching the far corner of the room, where the open door left a dark shadow. He could see into the shadow if he moved towards the far side of the bed where Rielle was hiding. Before the final step however, he turned to make sure the space was vacant. It wasn't.

Rielle's foot shot out, striking the man in the knee. The blow was startling more than anything else, but it was enough to knock him off balance. Before he could steady himself, Rielle was on her feet, both hands at the man's face. With blinding speed she grabbed the back of his head and chin, and with a firm snap she broke the man's neck.

He slumped onto the bed, the taser gun falling from his hand. Rielle didn't touch it, but could see by the setting that it had been modified to kill. Taking the mobie unit from the dead man's pocket she unplugged the ear piece.

"What was that?" a smooth metallic voice demanded from the mobie unit speaker.

"Your thug had a slight accident, Ares," Rielle answered, standing beside the window, cautiously looking out.

"So, little Gabby finally showed up on the scene," Ares replied, sounding amused. "How's

our Xena doing?”

“Just fine, Ares,” Rielle shot back. “But you’ll find that out for yourself soon enough.”

“You’re bluffing, little girl,” the God of War taunted back. “There’s no way she recovered from our previous encounter. Give it a rest, Gabrielle. You’re screwed this time, might as well bend over.”

“We’ll see about that,” Rielle shot back.

“What?” Ares sounded offended. “You don’t think I know your angle? Nice trip to Disneyland to use their VR tank? Go ahead, you’ll get no trouble from us. I’d love to destroy Xena face to face.”

Genuinely surprised that the God of War knew their plans, Rielle’s mind raced. But how, unless...? A spy. Thinking frantically, Rielle realized that it was now or never to use that to their advantage. “Glad you finally got the message. Your little spy isn’t too bright. We’ve been trying to set this up this showdown for some time.”

“You’re bluffing, bard,” Ares growled.

“Just keep telling yourself that,” Rielle replied cheerfully, breaking the mobie unit connection. Tossing the mobie on the bed, Rielle looked over at the dead agent. Carefully, she removed the wallet from his jacket pocket and quickly scanned its contents. Unsurprisingly, there wasn’t any ID. Putting it back, she leaned over his still form and opened the bedroom window. With a heave, she lifted him back up, and tossed him from the third story window. A publicly discovered body would keep Helms busy for a while anyway, covering his tracks.

By the time she descended the stairs and emerged from the building a small crowd had gathered gawking at the well-dressed corpse. Rielle was surprised to see a familiar face in the growing crowd.

“Robin,” she called, “what are you doing here?”

The hacker was clearly surprised to see the syscop and fidgeted nervously. She had short dark hair and dark eyes. A bit overweight and a touch malnourished, she was a perfect example of what could happen to hackers that didn’t take steps to stay healthy. Reflexively, she pulled a cigarette from her pocket and lit it, not caring that the activity was highly illegal. “Blue sent me to check on you. Said you’d be here. You’re on your way to the ‘horn, right?”

“Yeah,” Rielle nodded in agreement. She adjusted the shoulder strap on the duffle. “I’m taking some clothes to Xero. You coming?”

“I’ll catch up with you later,” Robin said after a long drag from her smoke. “I’ve got to check in with some other hackers before heading over, I’ll see you then.”

“Fine,” the syscop agreed, turning away from the grisly sight and heading for the Saddlehorn Pub & Grill.

Xero fidgeted in the Pub like a caged tiger. She knew it was stupid for her to be out and about. Still recovering from her near unsubbing, she didn’t have the strength or desire to fight her way out of any trouble. Of course, trouble found her anyway, she mused. This time in the form of one very attractive syscop. It wasn’t any use, try as she might, her mind continued to wander back to either Rielle or Xena. And both trains of thought were rather distracting.

She didn’t understand why she gave the syscop a second thought. But she did. An image flashed in her mind, warm skin beneath her hands. Distracted she pulled at her lower lip with her right hand. The scent of the syscop lingered on her fingers. Closing her eyes at the memory, she firmly put aside the realization that she’d blown it with the younger woman. *“I don’t see why I should care anyway,”* she thought. *“Except that I do.”*

Getting up, she wandered around the pub some more, her eyes finally landing on the portable disk reader. Fishing a mini-drive out of her saddle bag, she put it in the reader, quickly scanning over the files entered. When she found what she was looking for, she plugged the feed line of the large monitor into the unit and headed over to a near by booth. As an afterthought, she returned to the kitchen and drew a beer from the tap at the bar. The pub was closed on Tuesdays

and she decided to make full use of the solitude. Making herself comfortable in the booth, Xero flipped the drive controls with one hand and watched the stored files on the large monitor. Briefly searching through the information sent to her by Rielle, she stopped on the visual files. Letting the program do its work, she sat back and watched selected episodes of a 90s television show.

Xero was mesmerized by the images flashing before her eyes. Hours had passed and night enveloped South California but the hacker hadn't moved. She was so engrossed that she didn't notice anyone had entered the building until she heard the gentle voice from behind her.

"'The Lost Mariner'. That was one of my favorite episodes," Rielle commented quietly. Xero nearly jumped out of her skin, blue eyes blazing hotly into green. "I'm sorry, I thought you heard me," Rielle soothed.

"How long have you been standing there?" Xero demanded.

"Long enough," Rielle answered cryptically. "Relax will you, it wasn't like you were jacking off or anything."

The hacker's eyes blazed. "I don't like being snuck up on."

Rielle saw the seriousness in the other woman's expression and backed off. "I'm sorry. Really. I just got here. I opened the front door and you were kinda engrossed in the show."

The hacker shrugged. "S'okay." She looked past Rielle for signs of any one else. "Where's Blue and Ska?" she asked.

"They dropped me off at the psych unit. Either they decided I was trustworthy, or they didn't want to hang around. I went by your place, picked up some clothes for you and then caught a bus back here. I still need to pick up my car from last week."

"Oh," Xero said as she turned off the monitor and mini drive. "You went to see Paula?"

Rielle shrugged. "Yeah. She and I needed to talk. In all honesty you did me a favor. Whatever credentials you used to get her locked up are sticking like glue. She won't get out until day after tomorrow at the earliest. Hopefully Ares will be a bad memory by then."

Xero didn't know what to say, so she got up from the booth and headed for the kitchen muttering, "I'm glad you worked things out." Reaching the safety of the cookware she looked around for something to prepare.

"I didn't say we worked things out," Rielle clarified, following Xero into the kitchen and leaning against a stainless steel counter. "In fact, my marriage is a mess."

"And that's my fault?" the hacker asked defensively, selecting an assortment of pirated fresh vegetables.

"I didn't say that." Rielle watched as Xero began to chop the vegetables. "I mean, sure, you're a factor, a very big factor in what's going on, but that's not to say it's your fault."

"Why?" Xero asked, her voice chillingly neutral. "I fucked you over, didn't I? Invalidated your marriage contract in a building with witnesses? I don't have a problem copping to it."

Rielle opened her mouth to speak then quickly closed it. She studied the hacker for long moments before choosing her words carefully. Still worked up over being forced to kill, even in self-defense, a fight with the moody hacker was the last thing the syscop wanted. "I don't know why you're so angry about earlier, when personally I think I got the raw end of the deal.

"My relationship with you was a problem in my marriage long before today," Rielle said with tight control. "Before you met me even. I felt a connection with you from watching your exploits online. I *know* who you are, even if you don't, Xero. Is it helping me to know you could care less whether you're screwing me or some groupie? No. But I've got to get beyond that and focus on what's at hand. When this is over, provided we survive, then I'll have the time I need to work through what I'm feeling. Maybe then I'll kick your ass."

The hacker nodded absently, seemingly focused on sauteing the vegetables.

"Mind if I ask why you did it?" Rielle asked tiredly.

"Why I made a play for you?" Xero asked, looking up from her cooking. "Are you nuts? Why wouldn't I? You're...desirable, Rielle, get over it."

"So that's it?" Rielle challenged. "You were just hoping to get laid?"

"No," Xero replied honestly. "Look, kid. I don't know why. So why don't we just drop it."

“Don’t start that ‘kid’ bullshit with me, Xero,” Rielle shot back, her temper flaring. “You know I’m no kid. You feel connected to me, don’t you? And you don’t want to admit you can feel that way with anyone.”

“You’re flattering yourself,” Xero replied icily. “In more ways than one.”

“Am I really? You seriously think I’m that sweet and innocent. I tell you, at times I wish I were. Tell me something, hacker. You ever kill anyone in your line of work?”

Xero grabbed a few eggs from their chilled container and broke them over a bowl. “Personally? No,” she answered, picking up a whisk and mixing the eggs. “But I know full well that a number of my jobs have resulted in people getting unsubbed for one reason or another. Suicide, murder, sometimes even natural causes.”

“I’ve killed seven people in the eight years I’ve been a syscop. Four women and three men. Five were with a gun and the other two with my bare hands. You still think I’m innocent?” Rielle asked quietly.

Xero shrugged. “Yes. I don’t care how many people you had to kill. You still believe in good conquering evil simply because it’s good. It doesn’t work that way--it’s a toss up. You think you can change me. You can’t.”

“If that’s true, then why are you here helping? Fixing me an omelet even?”

Xero briefly met Rielle’s eyes and turned her attention to her cooking once more. “Because I’ve got nothing better to do.”

Rielle laughed out loud, rolling her eyes in frustration. “Blue is right, you are an asshole. Fine. You’re an unchangeable monster, I accept it. What you don’t seem to realize, Xero, is that none of this is new to me. Sure it hurts, yes, it’s frustrating, but I’ve been here before. You watched the show, you saw what happened. Gabrielle betrays Xena. Xena lies to Gabrielle. The two of them face a lifetime of challenges. I remember it all. Just how worked up do you think I can get over *you*, when I’ve had to deal with the Destroyer of Nations and an angry horde?”

“I’m really pissed at you right now, Xero, and I’m hurting. But I’m not going anywhere, I’m not leaving you, and I’m going to see this thing through no matter what.”

Xero handed the syscop her omelet without saying a word. It didn’t matter though; her expression said it all. She feared Rielle was insane, and hoped she was not.

The two sat down to an awkward silence at the bar. Each focused on her food, neither woman spoke or looked at each other. Rielle finally cleared her throat turned to the hacker. “This omelet is really good. Where did you learn how to cook?”

Xero shrugged. “I’ve been taking care of myself for a long time.”

“So had Xena, but she never got the hang of cooking.”

Distracted, Xero shoved a piece of tomato around on her plate. “Maybe she did,” she said quietly. “Maybe she could cook just fine but didn’t want Gabrielle to know. Perhaps it was important for Gabrielle to have something up on her.”

“Maybe,” Rielle allowed, studying the hacker thoughtfully before pulling herself back to business. “You know, we’ve got to do some planning for tomorrow. It’s one reason I came back here instead of just picking up my car. You need to pick some generals.”

Xero frowned at her. “For what?”

“It’s looking like there may be as many as three hundred hackers in the park on Friday. I need to know who you trust to keep things organized. We’re going to have to count on them while you’re fighting Ares.”

“Why don’t you just do it?” the hacker asked indifferently.

Rielle looked away as if she’d been stung. “If that’s what you want, fine. So who do you want to run the VR tank? I thought it might be me.”

Suddenly, Xero realized the slight she’d just handed the syscop. She shook her head, clearing her thoughts. “You’re right, Rielle. I’m sorry. I do want you operating the VR tank. Something screws up there and I’m dead. While you’ve got your own reasons for wanting that, I think you’ll be able to exercise more restraint than the others.”

“Don’t count on it,” the syscop warned, then softened. “I think Blue should be in charge of

the general operation. The others listen to her. The fact that she has no love for you and is helping anyway says a lot.”

Xero nodded. “She can deploy the others. We’ll need three basic teams for security, communications, and operations. Have Jenbob troubleshoot our security, I’m sure she can enlist the Amazon to help. We’ll need someone guarding the door that no one is going to get through--Moirra and Sue should also be on that detail and they can enlist LN and Deb for general ass-kicking.” With a sigh, she closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. Suddenly it was clear just what needed to be done and who should be doing it. “Ska, Puck and Kanvil should head for the communications center. They can cause trouble all over the park from there. They’ll also have to keep communication with the ‘Horn going. Shadow, Missy and Trill will need to keep trying to reach the President. I’d prefer the national guard *not* to fire on us if that’s at all possible. Wordee, MaryD and Cat can coordinate the teams of people in the park. I only want Blue, Ska and Wordee to have contact with you. You’ve got to know what’s going on but I don’t want you distracted. A couple of well timed car wrecks should tie up the freeway enough to keep people away from the park if this thing takes too long. And each team should have two shifts; we don’t need any gaps or screwups.”

“Do you realize what you’re doing?” Rielle asked softly when Xero stopped to open a fresh bottle of water.

“You said plan, so I’m planning.”

“But it’s how you’re planning. As a hacker working alone, when did you learn to coordinate the efforts of 300 people?” Rielle looked at Xero seriously. “This morning, between us... did it actually jog your memory.”

If Xero weren’t exhausted she might have been able to summon the energy to lie convincingly to the syscop. As it was, she didn’t even try. Empty blue eyes looked at Rielle, defeated. “That was just you and me Rielle,” she said quietly. “No Xena.”

Rielle nodded and pushed her plate away, standing up quickly. “No biggie,” she said even though her body language screamed otherwise. “I’ve got to get going. I’ll start handing out mission assignments and take my car back. Oh, and one more thing-- Ares is expecting you.”

“Look, Rielle--” Xero started to say, gently taking the syscop’s arm. She didn’t give a fuck about Ares at the moment.

“No,” Rielle shot back, yanking her arm from the hacker’s grasp. “Just don’t... say anything. I’ll see you tomorrow morning.” She hurried from the pub leaving Xero alone in the quiet building.

“Shit,” the hacker mumbled as she kicked over a bar stool.

Xero opened her eyes at a gentle rocking and she realized she was on horseback. Confronted by a wild mane of ebony hair directly in front of her, the hacker turned her attention to her side, surprised by the thick forest of trees. Gradually the trees thinned out a bit and she could see the ocean far below as the horse neared edge of the cliff. Pulling the horse to a stop, Xena surveyed her surroundings, then nudged the war horse away from the cliff’s edge.

“So, what’s up, Xena?” Xero asked, wondering where her companions were. “Still pretty pissed huh?” The warrior didn’t respond.

Looking beyond the warrior’s muscled form, Xero noticed a slight glint coming from a near by tree. In moments they reached the tree. From horseback, Xena only had to reach slightly above her head and pull the round metal object from the tree trunk.

“So that’s where it came from?” Xero commented as the warrior tied the metallic disc to her belt with a strip of leather thong.

The two continued to ride in silence as Xena made her way back down the cliff on a winding, narrow trail. Reaching the beach once more, she beaded for a small group of men. Xero recognized Borias instantly.

“Xena, where have you been?” he asked, his eyes noting the metallic disc at the warrior’s waist. “Some of the men were beginning to think you’d run off or something.”

“Is that so?” she inquired dryly, her voice devoid of humor.

Several men were unloading supplies from the warship while others were reloading those supplies into several wagons as well as onto a collection of war horses in mismatched tack.

“Maybe she had second thoughts about fighting in Greece?” one man said from the deck of the ship. “Lacks

the stomach to kill her countrymen.”

In one fluid motion, Xena grabbed the chakram and threw it away from the ship. It ricocheted off of the wagon wheel, a barrel of water (which it sliced open), a metal bracing on the ship’s mast, and cut a deadly swath across the sailor’s throat. He kneeled over, dead just as the disc hit another barrel and headed for Xena. She caught it easily, noting with satisfaction that there wasn’t any blood on the deadly weapon. Several sailors eyed their fallen comrade warily before returning to their tasks with renewed fervor. Borias rolled his eyes, appalled but unwilling to confront the blue eyed demon.

“Are we going to stop by your home town for supplies?” he asked as Xena smoothly dismounted.

“No.” She raised her voice loud enough for all to hear. “No one, and I mean no one is to go to Amphipolis. Anyone who steps within the city gates is a dead man.” Lowering her voice, her gaze fell on Borias. “There are several places we can stop to pick up men and supplies as we head inland. I’ve a taste for wine, Borias, I think our destination is obvious.”

He considered her words, eyes shining with understanding. “We’re headed for Cirra.”

Xero rode behind Xena as she made her way across Greece. Several times they were intercepted by men specifically wanting to join her army. The hacker was struck by how quick and decisive the warrior was in determining eligibility. She’d dismount, walk over to the perspective soldier and either kill him on the spot, or tell him to report to one of her lieutenants. At times even Borias seemed a little put off by her cold blooded ruthlessness.

As they crested a small hill, Xena dismounted, leaving Xero alone on the horse just as the hacker caught a glimpse of Janice and Mel also on horseback off in the distance. That gap closed quickly and the thunder of hoof beats grew rapidly. As Janice Covington neared, Xero could make out unmasked rage. It was clear that Janice was after her, and Mel was doing her best to get between hacker and archeologist.

“Xero, run!” Mel screamed although the hacker had already moved forward into the saddle and kicked the warhorse into a gallop. She passed by the edge of some farm land, barely noticing the rows and rows of grape vines thriving in the mild climate. Steadily she heard the archeologist gaining, the hoof beats and loud breathing of both horses ringing in her ears. She didn’t spare as much as a glance behind her but tried to veer off in another direction. It was a mistake. Janice Covington was clearly much more skilled on horseback than she was and anticipated the move. In moments she heard a snap then felt a searing sting as a bullwhip curled around her neck, cutting off her air.

The next instant she was flying from horse back, airborne for the briefest instant before hitting the ground behind Janice’s horse at full gallop. She couldn’t figure out why her neck simply didn’t snap. She managed to squeeze two fingers under the whip, letting her lungs get some much needed air. It was little consolation as the ground ate away at her skin.

Speeding over the rocky terrain, she managed to grasp the whip in both hands above her head, transferring the dragging force from her neck to her arms and shoulders. Holding firmly to the wound leather, she pulled for all she was worth, snapping the whip from Janice Covington’s grasp. Her body stopped moving as the horse sped off, leaving her to fight for. She was dimly aware of Janice’s return, her attention focused on getting the whip unwrapped from her neck.

“Give me one goddamn reason not to kill you, you fucking asshole!” Janice yelled as she leapt from her saddle. Fury emanated from her like a furnace.

“Would mentioning Ares help?” Xero croaked rubbing her neck. She was bleeding from numerous gashes and scrapes and felt almost as bad as she did when she last encountered the God of War.

Mel reined her horse to a stop and gracefully dismounted joining the other two. Xero glanced at her before turning her attention to Janice once more. “What the fuck are you so steamed about?”

“What am I--” Janice said incredulously as she lunged for Xero once more. Mel was instantly at her side stopping her. Unable to break free of her lover’s arms, she glared at the hacker. “That little stunt you pulled on Rielle, what do you think?”

“I figured as much. Didn’t know it was a killing offense where you come from.”

“Xero, you’re only getting the treatment you think you deserve,” Mel said seriously. “I think it’s Xena beginning to come to the surface. Obviously you’re feeling bad about it or Janice wouldn’t have done what she...”

“So now it’s my subconscious controlling you two?” The hacker laughed bitterly. “This just gets better and better.” She handed the whip back to Janice and let the smaller woman help her stand. Without comment, she mounted the horse behind the archeologist and rode back to the grazing horse she’d been pulled from. “That was a test, wasn’t it?” She asked Janice as they neared her horse.

“How do you mean?” the archeologist replied carefully.

“Things are gearing up for Ares. I think you want to see if I can handle it. If I’ll fight back.”

Janice turned around in the saddle to study the hacker closely. “If that’s true then you just failed, didn’t you?”

“I can’t fight you,” Xero replied with a grin, walking over to Xena’s horse. Regardless of how much she wanted to wring the archeologist’s neck, Janice looked like Rielle. With her feelings about the sycop in turmoil, Xero couldn’t imagine attacking the archeologist now.

“But you can treat someone who looks just like me as if she were an insignificant piece of meat,” Janice growled, still furious. Stung, the hacker looked down and was quiet. “Well...fuck!” Janice finally exclaimed in frustration. “Let’s get out of here. We’ve got the birth of a monster to witness.”

As the three rode back to Xena and her army, Mel nudged her horse to move along side Xero. “Whaddya want?” the hacker grumbled.

Mel shrugged demurely. “Just to know how it all went, before things got ugly, that is.”

Xero turned her steady gaze into identical blue eyes that returned her stare unflinchingly. “You don’t strike me as the type to kiss and tell, Melinda.”

“I’m not, but I suspect we have a number of things in common. A weakness for strawberry blondes being one of them.”

“Well, the whole thing was screwed. Except for the beginning. I don’t know what happened.” The hacker focused her eyes on the expanse of fertile farmland around them. The day was bright and the air uncomfortably warm.

“Yeah, but it’s a dry heat,” Janice quipped, riding up along side them and cutting into the hacker’s thoughts.

“Janice, if you don’t mind, I was trying to have a private conversation with Xero,” Mel told her lover sweetly.

“You think she’s going to be honest with you? Mel, she can’t even be honest with herself. It’s easy to mix lust with rage and then play out some scenario in your mind instead of paying attention to the person you’re actually making love to. God forbid you respond to the intensity of feeling that’s thrumming through your partner. Isn’t that right, hacker?” Xero didn’t answer. The archeologist rolled her eyes and addressed her lover once more. “Ole Xero has got some bizarre ideas about sex. How many women have you fucked? Fifty, sixty? And yet, you’ve only been touched, what, a half dozen times?”

“Janice!” Mel implored, blushing furiously.

“I don’t see why it should matter to you one way or another,” Xero commented coldly, glaring at the archeologist.

“It matters because it’s symptomatic of one of the larger things wrong with you,” Janice continued, undaunted. “You want me to spell it out, fine I will. The big difference between Xena and Callisto was that Xena learned to feel. No, Xena isn’t much of a feeling creature now, but she’ll get there. Callisto never did and it destroyed her. You, my friend, are rowing that same boat. Jump ship now and you may have a chance, but keep this up and I guarantee you’ll scare Rielle off.”

“I think we agree she’d be better off then.” the hacker commented acidly.

“Sure, I agree.” Janice nodded emphatically. “But that isn’t my decision to make. She’s decided to see this thing through. The question is, would you be better off? I’m asking you,” her expression softened, “no, I’m begging you, to make sure she doesn’t regret it. I spent too many wasted years knowing in my heart I was related to Gabrielle and hating myself for it. I owe Gabrielle everything.”

Xero studied the archeologist for a moment, then turned her attention to the Southerner. “What about you, Mel?” she asked. “You gonna beg me not to mess up my life?”

Mel smiled warmly with a loving gaze that included Janice as well as Xero in its scope. “Not at all, love, you’ll do just fine. If Xena could live out her days with Gabrielle at her side, and if Janice here could look past my spoiled, rich upbringing, I don’t doubt that you’ll find a way through this, especially since Rielle already loves you very, very much.”

Xero shook her head baffled at the complete lack of hostility or pity in the Southerner’s face.

“Honestly, Mel,” Janice added teasingly. “I didn’t have a problem with the money.”

“I swear you two deserve each other,” the hacker finally swore under her breath.

The three women joined up with Xena just as she was discussing the fate of Cirra with Borias and two other men. “There’s only forty of us, so don’t take stupid chances. They’re going to put up a fight so have your men stay sharp. Kill ‘em all if you have to. If the women and children are smart they’ll stay inside until we take what we want

and go. We're here for supplies, nothing else," she stressed, looking pointedly at the man next to Borias. "I see any man wasting valuable time with women and children I'll slit his throat."

Then, blue eyes shining brightly with destructive passion, Xena, of Amphipolis gave the signal and led the attack on Cirra. The Warrior Princess fought with gleeful savagery, slicing her way through one knot of resistant villagers then the next. The vision of death that rode through the village on horseback that day was not the man of bones used to frighten children. No, the death that charged through Cirra was a woman--beautiful, graceful, but nothing like the mothers that the frightened children clung to for comfort.

Xero watched, numb at the vibrant life spilling from bodies onto the Cirran dirt everywhere she looked. A man with a pitch fork was stabbed through the gut, another with a rake was decapitated. Two villagers dumped oil in a horse trough and set it ablaze trying to keep the horse mounted killers at bay. Xena's well trained steed jumped the obstacle easily and the two Cirrans were gutted for their trouble. A hideous scream brought Xena's attention back to the trough.

One of her men had shoved a villager into the blazing oil. Covered in flames, he screamed and instinctively ran for cover. Several of her men laughed at the pitiful attempts the running inferno made to save his life. He made it to one open door and fell down, dead and still in the door way, the smell of charred flesh filling the warrior's lungs.

In seconds, the house caught fire. Thatched roofs, dried from the summer heat couldn't withstand the tongues of flame lapping up from the burning doorway. Already burning out of control, the flames spread from one house to the next, billowing black smoke adding to the confusion and carnage of the attack.

Xero watched in stunned silence as building after building caught fire, the hiding inhabitants of Cirra too terrified to leave their burning buildings and take their chances with the cold blooded killers outside. The cries of dying women and children added to the din of death that enveloped Cirra that day.

Borias fought his way over to Xena who studied the scene with cool detachment. "Get some men over to that storage building before it catches fire," she instructed. "I came here for Cirran wine, I sure as Tartarus ain't leaving without it."

Knowing better than to question the order, Borias headed off. Xena watched him go until something on the ground diverted her attention. Running from a burning house, a young girl stopped short at the sight of the mounted warrior in her path. Cheeks stained with tears, her soft brown eyes glittered with rage and hatred. Her back straight, head held high, the young girl glared at the warrior. "Why!" she screamed.

Xena smirked at the girl, kneeling her horse into a trot as she headed down the street, leaving the child alone in her fury. But not quite alone. Xero walked over to the child, kneeling in the dirt in front of her. "Callisto," she whispered, her voice choking. "I'm so sorry."

The child, unable to see the hacker before her, stared at the receding warrior. "I don't know who you are," she said calmly, "But you're going to pay for this."

"Truer words have never been spoken," Mel said, putting a gentle hand on Xero's shoulder. "You're still paying for it." With a gentle pull she urged the hacker away from the carnage she couldn't change.

"And so is she," Xero whispered.

*I would bleed to love her
— Lindsey Buckingham*

Chapter 8: Battledrills

The noise made by returning hackers woke Xero from her sleep. Twisting her head from side to side didn't do much to relieve cramped muscles so she stopped and opted to check her watch instead. As she suspected she'd been out for more than eight hours. Easing out of the booth she headed for the center of the pub where she met Blue, just coming in from the front.

"There's a bag of clothes here," the hacker said, looking as happy to see Xero as one would be getting an audit notice from the IRS.

"They're mine. Rielle dropped them by last night."

Blue looked around the pub. "And didn't stay? I'm glad to see she's catching on."

"Just drop it, Blue," the raven haired hacker warned, towering over the shorter woman. "What happened after you guys left yesterday?"

Blue shrugged and headed for the kitchen where she began making coffee. More hackers entered the building, gravitating towards the kitchen and the prospect of hot java like moths to fire. "Rielle worked out a game plan for contacting the most Disney workers utilizing remote access systems. She's good, figured out a way to use cop encryption codes. We dropped by on some locals that haven't been at the 'horn for awhile and told 'em what was going on. A few more are going to meet us at the hotel, but the majority will contact us in the park tomorrow. We managed to drag Demeter out of retirement, but didn't take Rielle with us to do it. Turns out she's the cop who put her away."

"Good to know. MaryD will be glad she's back." Xero commented, accepting the mug of hot coffee that Blue handed to her. "What'd you guys do with Rielle when you went to see Demeter?"

"We dropped her off at the hospital so she could see her wife. I guess she went by your place to get your clothes when she was done." Blue took a sip from her own cup and smiled approvingly at the flavor. Looking around at the assembled hackers her smile began to fade. "Where's Ska, I thought she was making breakfast?"

"Chill, Blue," Tess soothed moving behind the counter and gently shoving the muscular woman out of the kitchen. "Ska, Puck and Kanvil went to pick up the car. I'll get breakfast started."

"While we're waiting," Wordee suggested, pulling out an input pad, "why don't we get these room assignments taken care of for tonight? We've got enough rooms if we double up." Every one nodded their assent and she went down the list of names. "Should we just do this alphabetically and be done with it?"

"Can't," Jenbob said shaking her head. "That would put Grace and Gwen in the same room and they broke up."

There were more nods and Wordee duly noted the information on her pad. "Me and Jenbob can share a room," Julie, the statuesque Amazon offered with a sly wink. A few knowing glances were exchanged around the table and the information was duly noted.

"Good idea Julie," Wordee agreed. "Why don't we take care of the people here first. Who'll room with me?" Several people spoke up at once and she eyed them suspiciously. "Thanks, I think I'll wait and ask MaryD when she gets here."

Two hours later a pub full of women continued to bicker and argue over rooming assignments. "You simply can't put Della and Chris in the same room-- they'll kill each other," Sharon explained for what felt like the tenth time.

"Anyone with a problem is asking to get their ass-kicked," LN commented with Deb nodding her agreement. "This isn't like that vacation a bunch of us took to Las Vegas, it's one stinkin' night for chrissakes."

"Try explaining that to my wife when she finds out I'm staying with my ex's ex," an unseen voice called from the far end of the pub.

"Well if you'd have married a hacker then you'd have someone to room with, wouldn't you?" someone else taunted from the doorway.

In moments the pub was filled with the din of thirty women all talking at once, loudly. A shrill whistle erupted and the room fell silent once more. From the center of the throng Xero looked at her now silent colleagues, a fierce scowl on her face. Taller than most, she was easily visible. When she spoke her voice was calm, quiet and had the faint edge that she was waiting for any excuse to go postal and kill someone. "Those of you that have someone in mind you can room with and not face repercussions at home, tell Wordee. Then we'll match up the names that are still left. Anyone complaining about her room assignment at that point will get switched to my room. Is that clear?" People were quiet for a moment then began to pair off, informing Wordee of their sleeping arrangements.

"You handled that like a general," Rielle commented, making her way to the center of the

room.

“How long have you been here?” Xero asked.

“Long enough to be amused.”

The hacker frowned. “I know things look a little chaotic right now, but when we get to the hotel and start planning the thing, I think they’ll settle down. Bat handled the arrangements when we went to Vegas and somehow it seemed more organized...”

“Relax,” the syscop assured her. “If you’ve got faith in them, that’s all that matters. They’re in this for you, ya know.”

Xero looked around nervously, hoping no one had overheard the syscop’s comment. “They don’t know that, and if you want them at the park tomorrow, we’ll keep that little detail to ourselves.” Catching sight of someone, she nodded down to her companion. “Ska and the others are back, it’s time to get this show on the road.

The women moved outside, to sort out rides to the park. Rielle scowled up at Xero when she noticed the car parked out front. “You stole my wife’s car?” she asked incredulously.

“You didn’t say it belonged to her wife,” Ska said, the color draining from her face. Puck and Kanvil glared accusingly at Xero.

“Relax, Rielle,” Xero said with a shrug. “It isn’t like she can use the car until day after tomorrow anyway.”

“And what if something happens to it?” The syscop demanded.

“Nothing’s gonna happen to it.”

“Shit, you two sound married,” Ska grumbled, then ducked behind Puck and Kanvil when both women turned an unamused glare in her direction.

“Shouldn’t she be in school or something?” Rielle deadpanned causing a burst of laughter from all in hearing distance save the waitress. “I’ll drive Paula’s car, Xero you can drive my car. Lets get going.”

Check in at the hotel went smoothly. Working out sleeping arrangements ahead of time speeded up the process considerably. With only a few people switching at the last minute the throng of hackers disappeared into the hotel shortly after arrival.

Xero found her room without any trouble. She’d been given a large suite on the thirty second floor with windows that looked out over the mouse shaped pool. Since everyone was planning to meet there, she made quick use of the shower. A habit since childhood days in the orphanage she was showered and had her hair washed within five minutes. Opening the small duffle bag Rielle had packed she poked through the clothes. The syscop had packed several pairs of underwear, skimpy black, metallic green the god awful red ones Bat had given her as a joke. There were three pairs of white socks as well and two different pairs of jeans, one blue and faded the other grey and not as worn. She had two t-shirts to choose from a well worn soft gray one and a black one that said Hard Rock Cafe: Bajor on it. Deciding on the black underwear, grey shirt and faded jeans, Xero dressed. She had just donned the flannel shirt, and was about to pick up her socks when a light knock rapped at the door. With an unconscious gesture she flipped her still wet hair behind her shoulders and answered the door.

“You’re early,” she commented when she saw Rielle standing just outside.

“They arranged for my room to be across the hall from yours. It was a quick trek,” the syscop replied, glancing back at the door to her room all of 10 feet away. She entered the room, easing a heavy bag from her shoulder. Depositing the drive reader on the table she moved to the window to check out the hacker’s view.

“Who are you sharing it with?” Xero asked, watching the other woman intently.

Rielle turned from the window and smiled. “Jealous?”

“Curious,” the hacker clarified.

“What if I told you it was Blue?” Rielle pressed, watching the hacker closely.

“I’d say you should get some earplugs. I’ve heard Blue snores something awful.”

“You don’t know first hand?”

Xero smirked, all too willing to play the syscop’s game. “Last time Blue and I were in the

same bed, neither of us were sleeping.” The color drained a little from the syscop’s face and she realized she’d made her point. “But that was a long time ago and she’s been rather pissy with me ever since.”

“To answer your question,” Rielle said stiffly, directing the conversation away from the hacker’s conquests. “I’m not sharing a room with anyone. Wordee said there was an extra, and they didn’t have the heart to put me in here with you.”

“How thoughtful.”

“I thought it was,” Rielle insisted, determined not to let the obnoxious hacker get the best of her. “And you rate this big room all to yourself because...?” she asked dryly.

“Because we’re meeting in here and I don’t mind sleeping with twenty-five empty pizza boxes.”

A Loud knock on the door announced more arrivals and Rielle let her retort die on her lips. Eight hackers had arrived bearing boxes of pizza, bottles of soda and a variety of other foodstuffs. The earliest arrivals staked out the prime sitting positions on the couches and bed present in the suite. Food and serving dishes littered every available surface and within minutes it was hard to move through the throng of bodies. At the earliest opportunity Rielle drifted into the crowd to chat with hackers that had now become friends. Telling herself she didn’t care, Xero ate a couple pieces of pizza, her mind still working on plans for the upcoming battle.

The crowd was large and loud and within minutes of the last arrivals Security knocked on the door with a complaint.

“Who’s the skinny geek-bob?” someone asked when the lone security officer made his way into the room.

“I need to speak with whomever is in charge?” he announced looking around a bit dubiously.

“Why?” someone else asked reaching for another slice of pizza.

“The gentleman next door is complaining.”

Wordee made her way to the guard, annoyance etched on her face. “I asked to get this whole floor. He declined our offer to switch rooms.”

“He’s still