

ULTIMATE HACK

Lance Erlick

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ONE

Hercules launched his one-hundred-thirty-seventh electronic probe. Maybe this one would penetrate the fifth firewall on Krill Metal Enterprises' private server.

Weary from a week with little sleep, he scooted his chair away from the six flat screens that lined the basement wall. He stood to stretch and tripped over the battery backup sump-pump, the one he'd talked his mom into installing to protect his equipment.

In the process of steadying himself, he knocked over the king on a nearby chessboard. This was where he tested new strategies for the matches he played on World Champion Games Online. He hadn't made a move in over a week. In fact, he hadn't left his mom's basement in all that time.

He replaced the king, tried to ignore the bad omen, and sat down. While waiting to see what his probe produced, he rummaged through foil junk-food bags for something to tide him over. The power bars had disappeared days earlier, along with the cookies and pretzels.

"What's going on down there?" his mom yelled from the top of the stairs. Her shrill voice rang in his ears. "Did something crash?"

Hercules sank lower in his seat. "It's nothing, Mom."

"It didn't sound like nothing. Are you drinking again?"

His mom slung loaded questions to trip him up, since "no" admitted that he had been drinking before. *Not at home.* "I'm not drinking, Mom."

"Aren't you going to work today?"

"I am working." *Just not on my boring intern job.*

"Come have breakfast first. You haven't eaten a proper meal in a week. You're too skinny to skip food. You're not doing drugs down there, are you?" his mom yelled, *as if a druggie might confess.*

Maybe to get the nagging to stop. "No, Mom."

Hercules had no use for anything that dulled his mind, which ached from a puzzle far beyond the chess or other hacking challenges: how to see what Krill was hiding. "I need to concentrate." He hoped that would send her away for a while.

After all, eating was a waste of time—except to stop his belly from grumbling. He emptied the crumbs from some cookie bags into his mouth and looked around. After a week, he'd scrounged all the food he'd brought downstairs and his mom refused to buy more until he joined her for a "proper" meal.

Hercules, not his real name, drummed his fingers on his virtual keyboard, as if that could speed things up. At least it diverted attention from his empty stomach and how he'd failed to penetrate Krill's last layer of security.

He'd used every tool in his library, including the contents of both hard drives attached to his system and the ones he'd locked in a fireproof safe on a bowed plastic shelf because he didn't trust centralized cloud databases. Rational thought begged him to give up this quest.

A dead-end after weeks of work would be devastating, but something inside him wouldn't let go. Okay, the challenge of breaking firewalls others couldn't was a thrill, but it was more than

that. Each night when his head hit the pillow in the far corner of the basement, this inner force plagued him with the incongruity of the tightest security he'd encountered for such a mundane company doing routine boring metal fabrication.

The biggest mental pest was Simeon. Hercules knew little about the hacker legend: not country, age, or even gender. Simeon was a god in the dark corners of the virtual world: faceless, voiceless, a ghost to those who pursued him/her. S/he was also Hercules' mentor, the one who introduced him to a network of brothers and sisters who helped him find niche code and special purpose hacks.

"You can find anything you need on skull-and-crossbones sites," Simeon had texted, using a filter to remove any personal quirks to fool those with sophisticated language analyzers. "But be careful. There are crazy Jackers out here."

Jackers were like hackers except they got into your head to mess you up. That was enough reason to hide behind false names, faces, and profiles. In any case, Simeon's last mission was Krill Metal Enterprises. Then s/he'd vanished.

Simeon didn't just disappear as in never heard from again. All electronic traces of him/her vanished, as if s/he'd never existed. That hit Hercules like a kick to the gut. The vanishing act had reminded him of how his father abandoned his family two years ago for a girl right out of high school, and a job in another country.

Despite Daddy's fancy executive job and top one-tenth-of-one-percenter paycheck, he'd pleaded poverty. Dear old Dad paid only what the courts could get from him. Then he vanished off the grid. The payments stopped, leaving Hercules and his mom struggling to get by. Ever since, Hercules had been hunting his deadbeat dad in secure databases and behind secure corporate firewalls.

This driving need, alter ego, or hacker demon—take your pick—which he couldn't share with family or friends, spurred Hercules to uncover what had happened to Simeon as a way to learn more about how his dad vanished. Somehow, he decided, these mysteries related to what the mundane company was hiding. Even the registered owner's name, John Jones, was an alias, with no public information. Hercules was certain he was a top earning one-tenth-of-one-percenter like his father.

Spurred by the hunt for his dad, Hercules became a self-proclaimed champion of transparency, hoping to spare others the pain of lies and deceit. He vowed to uncover Krill's secrets and publicize them on his website, the Labors of Hercules, as he'd done with others before. If he was lucky, he'd find clues to locating his dad.

Krill's tight security had to cover some hideous stench. Hercules might find a buyer for the secrets if doing so didn't violate his moral compass: don't hurt people trampled by big companies and the rich. Impersonal corporations and their lackeys were fair game. He wasn't selling out for the money. He used all proceeds to buy equipment to continue his mission.

A screen to his right held the private image of another rail-thin boy in a dirty tee shirt and ragged jeans: Hercules' partner, Apollo. The boy sported a week's worth of beard beneath uncombed sandy hair. Few, other than Hercules, could connect the Apollo screen name to this quiet, private figure or his real name, Paulo Antonelli. It seemed a poor alias for someone who hid in the shadows and didn't aspire to greatness, but it was easy for his friend to remember.

As part of their friendship and collaboration, Hercules and Apollo had set up reciprocal cameras in their home offices in case either got into trouble. After all, they were digging into very secure data systems. Like Apollo, Hercules had changed his name according to the French greeting, which literally asked, "What do you call yourself?" The English equivalent, "What's

your name?” sounded like: “What label did others slap on you?”

To succeed in his mission, Hercules needed one more mutation of a probe bot that the Krill firewall wouldn’t recognize. Apollo knew how to create small data packets to drill through impossible security. He hadn’t hit a system he couldn’t crack. Yet Apollo was sweating so much he’d draped a towel around his neck. Empty foil bags littered the table around him and tumbled onto the floor. Despite the sweat, Apollo didn’t appear to be drinking. No mugs or plastic containers were in sight.

“You okay?” Hercules asked into the microphone.

Apollo stared at his virtual keyboard in the corner of his bedroom. His hands trembled. When he spoke, words came out slow and methodical as if he’d chewed on them for hours. “No, man, I’m not.” He brushed aside foil bags, dropping crumbs on the virtual keyboard. Gibberish flashed across his screen as it executed Python code in response to the crumbs dancing across the tabletop. Apollo scooped the rest of the crumbs into his hand and popped them into his mouth.

Another screen showed Apollo’s public image. A small humanlike figure of the Greek god held the world above his head. The contrast between public and private images drew a tear to Hercules’ eyes. It tugged at his sense of injustice to think of how his decent friend had been bullied one time too many for being shy, slow of speech, and socially awkward.

To avoid pushing his friend too hard, Hercules softened his voice, though he couldn’t contain his enthusiasm. “Come on, dude. It’s the hack of a lifetime. We could nail another shady one-percenter.”

“Enough.”

“You’re the best,” Hercules said. “I’m counting on you. You’ll be a hero.”

“Save it, man. You’ve gone wacky over this. You know that? Wacky. This isn’t fun anymore. We could get into serious trouble.” Apollo used his sleeve to clean the table and then typed to fix the garbage on his screen.

Apollo hadn’t been as eager to take on the one-percenter cause. Then Hercules hooked him up with their summer internship at XTEL Development, which allowed them to work from home. The job was only between high school and their backup plan of going to college. And that was only if they couldn’t support themselves by hacking.

The intern program was supposed to give them skills to help in college or to get a real, full-time job. So far the internship hadn’t taught Hercules squat, but their servers held a lot of interesting stuff, such as salaries and client firewall protocols.

He resented doing menial work for a boss who was more interested in hitting on female interns than in giving the interns real work. Conrad Jackson was another home-wrecker, with money and an apartment hidden from his wife, according to his many bank records. Conrad also owned stock in a company with a name similar to Krill Metal Enterprises, though all shell companies sounded alike. Still, the intern job was a useful cover to keep Hercules’ mom from bugging him when he was home.

“Come on, Apollo,” Hercules said in the most soothing tone he could manage. “You’re a god. A top god.”

“One more word and I’ll pull the plug.” Apollo pointed to a tiny icon on his screen.

The image was too small and far away for Hercules’ camera to pick out any details. “Is that the code?”

“I’m warning you. Give this up before the Feds pound on our doors. You want to spend the rest of your life in Area 51?”

“That’s for aliens, dude. Besides, this isn’t government.”

“Go away.” Apollo reached over to turn off the camera and mike.

“Don’t,” Hercules said. “I’ll leave you alone. Just don’t quit on me.” He returned his attention to the probe he’d sent out. Nothing yet.

* * *

On another screen, also with reciprocal cameras, was the image of Dido, Amanda Jains, another co-intern at XTEL, and the third member of their hacker partnership. She refused to say if she’d taken her alias from a popular singer or from Aeneas’ mythical lover. That Dido ended up killing herself when Aeneas left her to complete his mission, which made her an unattractive namesake to Hercules’ thinking. But Amanda was a romantic who loved to act mysterious.

The biggest mystery to Hercules, despite rationalizations he’d told himself, was why Dido liked him; at least she said she did. Although they’d gone to the same school, they met on a hacker chat-room. She’d impressed him with her playfulness and her ability to break certain private-key codes. They should have been nearly impossible to crack except for the most determined brute-force attacks, but she’d found anomalies that greatly reduced the task.

She’d called him cute, even before they’d met in person. She certainly was, though her baggy clothes rarely showed it.

When he’d let slip that he found her gorgeous as a goddess, she’d laughed. “You say the sweetest things so I’ll help you hack.”

They fought, kissed, and made up, as if it was all a playful game to her. To his knowledge, she had no other boyfriends, yet dangled mysteries surrounding what attracted her to him. She let him lead on XTEL or transparency projects, knowing that he’d get stumped and come to her as the best code decryptor he knew.

“Am I the only one who knows how good you are?” he’d asked her last week as they left XTEL’s offices.

“Our little secret.” Dido winked and kissed him on the cheek.

The screen to his right showed the back of her silky cinnamon hair, pulled up in a pony tail. He was lucky to get to see Dido every day, since her mom didn’t like him hanging around. He could almost imagine that they were in the same room, as if they were virtual roommates. He would rather have watched Dido’s face, but she’d hidden the camera in the wall behind her so her mom wouldn’t find it.

Dido liked to tease that she could see him behind her. The thought that she might be studying him on the screen to her left made his hands tremble. His heart skipped a beat. He couldn’t tell if she was mad at him, ignoring him, or just absorbed with solving a decryption problem. With better camera resolution, he could have seen himself on her screen along with his screen watching her, like the million images from putting two mirrors facing each other.

Dido sat at her computer beside her bed in her mom’s attic, paneled to cover the rafters. It was a bed Hercules longed to return to. After he reached his prize he could leave these distractions behind and give Dido the attention she deserved.

Hercules had invited her over that morning.

“I won’t crawl into your wretched dungeon,” she’d said.

“I’ll clean it up.”

She pouted. “Why don’t you come up here instead?”

“I need my high speed link. Besides, your system still has a security glitch.”

“Then launch your probes and come over to fix it.” Her eyes teased him through the screen.

“I can’t risk leaving my computer idle. If I turn it off, the probes may bounce back and disappear.”

“Just today,” Dido had said, in the sweetest voice. “You need a break. You haven’t eaten, have you?”

What he needed was a successful probe. “If I don’t find anything, I’ll come over tonight.”

“Maybe I won’t be here.” She turned off the screen with his image, and returned her attention to her work—her way of punishing him by saying she no longer saw him. Twinges of jealousy gripped Hercules over their XTEL boss’ interest in her. Hercules couldn’t help feeling she encouraged such speculation to stir him up inside. Whether she did or didn’t, it was working.

* * *

Despite what he’d told Dido, Hercules was tempted to shut down his computer, risk losing the probe’s connection, and go to her. He’d been neglecting her this past week. He couldn’t help it. Krill reminded him of their boss, Conrad Jackson, a corporate man with big toys. And Conrad the womanizer reminded Hercules of his father.

Hercules’ breath caught, he struggled to suck in air. His throat tightened. A migraine threatened to blind him. If he hadn’t already launched the latest probe, he would have gone to Dido right then. She knew how to help him clear his head. In fact, she’d gotten him to tell her everything about his father, down to the last detail of catching the old man in bed with a blonde two years older than Hercules, a girl he’d looked up to until that night.

He shuddered at the image burned into this brain of his naked father on top of the unclothed girl. The blonde glared at him with a look both innocent and worldly, mixed with anger at the interruption. Stunned, he’d lingered, unable to absorb what he was seeing. It wasn’t until later when he couldn’t sleep that reality sank in. If he could have rebooted his brain to wipe clean those images he would have. Instead, that picture popped up like unwelcome ads on the Internet.

When the probe returns, he told himself. No matter what it finds, I’ll surprise Dido. Take her to our favorite spot on the lake for a swim. Just the two of us.

In the meantime, he puzzled over where he was going wrong, and whether his efforts were futile. If this company turned out to be nothing more than what it claimed to be, Hercules stood to embarrass himself for having pushed Apollo and Dido to help.

Even so, he couldn’t stop seeing Krill’s layers of security, like the layers of lies and deceptions his father used to hide his affair. The late nights weren’t for work. Mid-week business trips were to shack up with the blonde. It had been a fluke that Hercules skipped school the day his mom visited her sister and his dad decided to save a buck on hotel rooms.

That day his father’s web of dirty secrets unraveled and the facade of normalcy collapsed. He moved out. Over the next weeks, Hercules replayed every word out of his father’s mouth, right down to his dad pleading that they didn’t have money while he lavished gifts on his girlfriend.

After the old man vanished, Hercules vowed to track him down using his corporate hacks. Someone had to know where the bastard had gone. But how do you find a ghost?

In the meantime he dug into suspicious corporations to expose their deceptions. Two months ago on dark-net chat rooms, several people exposed a local power station dumping pollutants into a nearby river. Other hackers either couldn’t dig into this or weren’t motivated. Since this was in Hercules’ neighborhood, he dug in.

With Dido’s ability to decrypt secure codes, Apollo’s electronic drills, and AI bots downloaded from the dark-net, they slipped into the company’s secure servers. Hercules didn’t expect much. After all, if you committed a crime, you dumped the evidence. Yet he uncovered records and emails tracing every action for their attorneys—something about attorney-client privilege.

Hercules broke the story, releasing records to the press and to the EPA. No one responded.

The company's attorneys made sure of that.

Unwilling to give up, he broke stories about tax evasion, marital infidelity, and outright fraud by the company's officers, which he posted on his foreign-hosted website: Labors of Hercules. He sent links to spouses, coworkers, and customers. The company replaced all named officers and announced plans to clean up the environment. The power of transparency was holding people accountable as no one did to his dad.

Last month, Dido helped him crack secure DOD codes. With those, they penetrated a Department of Defense site to expose plans to use drone strikes against terrorists in a new location in Africa. Apollo's electronic drills threatened to override the drones' navigation if the DOD didn't come clean. Hercules posted this information on his website, which promptly crashed. Even so, the military scrapped the drone strikes pending an investigation.

Then counter-probes surfaced, tracing how Hercules and his team had sent signals to threaten a secure military operation. The Department of Defense didn't like that kind of transparency.

Working around the clock, Dido helped him crack into several foreign databases while Apollo's drilling probes severed links and scrambled traces of their activities. They barely destroyed the last connection on a Bangladeshi database before the Feds could trace the feeds back to Hercules.

Each night for the next two weeks he was plagued with nightmares of a knock at the door, handcuffs, and the worse part, a cell with no Internet access. Apollo threatened to quit. Dido warned Hercules to stop charging at windmills. Hercules had to admit he felt as paranoid as they did, but bravery was pursuing the target even when all else warned you to retreat. At least he'd read that somewhere.

Last week, after dark-net chat-room noise peaked over Simeon and Krill Metal Enterprises, Hercules hit a wall trying to tackle Krill's security on his own. He asked for Dido's help with a tricky bit of encryption.

She balked. "I'm tired of coding, tired of staring at the screen. You've taken the fun out of this. You've turned it into a boring job."

"We owe it to Simeon," Hercules said.

"You don't even know Simeon." She glared at Hercules with suspicious eyes.

Hercules didn't know Simeon yet felt he did. On the off chance Simeon was female, he let it drop. He didn't want to awaken any jealousy in Dido over a hacker he would never meet. "You can crack codes few others can. I need you."

"I want out of this humid attic. It's like having a hairdryer shooting hot mist in my face. Why don't you ever take me places like you used to? Like a real boyfriend?"

"Dido, you know—"

"Save it. At least a movie theater would be cooler. We could go wall-climbing at the mall. There's a dance at the community center tomorrow night."

He couldn't risk telling her how lame a community center dance sounded. He felt too embarrassed. Despite his assumed name, Hercules had two left feet. Or maybe God had put them on backward. He couldn't dance or climb and was too mortified to let Dido see him stumble around like a ridiculous clown.

In any case he'd said, "This is the big one. Trust me. We crack this and I'll take you to a dozen movies." Actually, he found most movies boring. They added too much Hollywood glamour from another bunch of rich one-percenters hiding behind their public masks.

His security probe was taking too long. He'd routed the electronic code through a hack into a nearby network hub, bounced the probe off other hubs, and then spoofed his address as if it came

from overseas. Even accounting for that, this was slow, which encouraged him that he might crack another layer of security and download some real files.

Most of what he'd learned about Krill was boring: they bought and sold metal parts. *One more layer*, he told himself. Then he'd have the juicy stuff.

Hercules received a message from another XTEL intern: *Hey Zak-Bak. Y U not at work? Need help finding that new statistics file. Randy.*

Hercules' optical pathways threatened to short-circuit him into blindness over a mutation of a name he couldn't stand. He hated Zackary, Bakke, and the nickname students and interns saddled him with. If he'd had the body of Hercules, he could have put a stop to the name-bashing, though saying anything made the taunting worse.

Zak-Bak coughed at his tablet-phone, as if to transmit the germs. He texted the location of the file any imbecile could have found and signed off: *Sick day.*

With no reply to his probe, Hercules returned his attention to Dido. She was right. He should have packed it in for the day and played hooky with her. They could have found some place to hang out. After all, they both enjoyed walks through the woods down by the lake. Instead, he'd badgered her and Apollo to work on this seemingly unbreakable security shield.

Yet he couldn't let it go. He had to do this for Simeon.

Dido rose from her computer. Hercules held his breath, hoping she was finished, that she'd created a tool to penetrate a Schaeffer Wall, the toughest security he'd come across yet. Instead of sending the file, she turned off his camera feed, blinding him to the space around her computer. This was a breach of their agreement, beyond turning off his screen.

"Dido, you okay?"

She didn't respond, probably turned off the speakers as well. Hercules scowled and tried to recall whether he'd heard a knock. He replayed the recording and froze. There it was: a soft knock he'd missed while texting with Randy.

Hercules pulled up a separate feed from a camera in a cute porcelain cat he'd given Dido out of concern that someone might break into the attic and hurt her. He figured she knew about the second camera, since she dressed in her attic bathroom.

He wasn't snooping. He knew how amazing she looked. And he wasn't collecting pictures. Besides, she had a camera on him as part of their agreement.

On screen, she answered the outside door to her attic apartment, not the interior door into the rest of her mother's house. Hercules had used the rickety stairs to that door to visit Dido in the middle of the night. Now it opened to ...

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STORIES by Lance Erlick

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Outcast Regina Shen is forced by the World Federation to live on the seaward side of barrier walls built to hold back rising seas due to abrupt climate change. A hurricane threatens to destroy what's left of her world, tearing Regina from her family.

Global fertility has collapsed. Chief Inspector Joanne Demarco of the notorious Department of Antiquities believes Regina holds the key to avoid extinction. Regina fights to stay alive and avoid capture while hunting for her family. Does she have the resilience to survive?

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Annabelle Scott lives under the iron rule of a female-dominated régime that forces males to fight to the death to train the military elite. When pressed into service as a mechanized warrior to capture escaped boys, Annabelle stays true to herself by helping some escape. Her defiance endangers everyone she loves and thrusts her to a place of impossible life and death decisions.

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Despite being a military recruit, Annabelle Scott rebels against her female-dominated régime by refusing to kill a handsome boy she fancies and helping him escape. Auditory implants and cameras allow her commander to watch her 24-7. Can she help the boy free his brother from a heavily guarded geek institute without destroying her family or getting killed?

Written as a standalone story, *The Rebel Trap* follows Annabelle's adventures from *The Rebel Within*.

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REBELS DIVIDED (Rebel Series book 3)

The first time Geo sees Annabelle, they meet as enemies and she doesn't kill him, which mystifies them both. It's after the 2nd Civil War with the nation divided into an all-female Federal Union and a warlord controlled Outland. The Outland warlord kidnaps Annabelle's sister and kills Geo's pa. Can Annabelle and Geo overcome mutual distrust and work together to rescue her sister and gain justice for his pa's murder? Will their feelings for each other derail or further their goals?

Written as a standalone story, *Rebels Divided* is also part of the Rebel series, three years later.

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ULTIMATE HACK (novelette)

Hercules considered himself an ordinary anonymous geek with a special reason to remain in his mom's basement. Ignoring warnings from his best friend and his girlfriend, he pursues the hack of a lifetime into a top secret security system. What could possibly go wrong when he meets his match?

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SHE-DEVIL ROCKS (novelette)

Inspired by *Lord of the Flies*.

Bullied as the smallest of thirteen boys in his class, Bradley is on a plane that crashes on a remote island with a bully who is out of control. Bradley meets a mysterious tomboy who shouldn't be there. He has to learn to survive on the hostile island, deal with the tomboy, and come to terms with the bully.

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Living on the seaward side of barrier walls built to protect against rising seas, the only means of survival for Regina Shen is underwater salvage, which is banned by the World Federation. After a storm takes a friend's family and home, Regina is determined to help by defying the Federation

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MAIDEN VOYAGE (short story)

Security Chief Nina Rekovic keeps the peace on the all-female Maiden's Ark that left Earth five years before. Distress signals say Earth is lost, stranding lunar colonists. While balancing Returners she sympathizes with, a dictatorial captain, and an estranged lover who betrays her, can Rekovic solve the conspiracy before she's imprisoned or killed?

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WATCHING YOU (short story)

At the intersection of pervasive networks and the Patriot Act, we have the ability and some say the obligation to know everything about everyone. Can privacy survive? Can the individual endure?

Harold is a second-class citizen and a low-level worker in a government surveillance system charged with reviewing "criminal activity." He has private thoughts about a woman he's forbidden from approaching. He will not be deterred.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lance Erlick writes science fiction thrillers for young adult and adult readers. He is the author of *The Rebel Within*, *The Rebel Trap*, and *Rebels Divided*, three books in the Rebel series. In those stories, he explores the consequences of Annabelle Scott following her conscience. He authored the Regina Shen series—*Regina Shen: Resilience*, *Regina Shen: Vigilance*, *Regina Shen: Defiance*, and *Regina Shen: Endurance*. This series takes place after abrupt climate change leads to the Great Collapse and a new society under the World Federation. A related short story is *Regina Shen: Salvage*. His latest novel is *Xenogeneic: First Contact* about encounters with an alien race aiming to take over Earth. Lance is also the author of unrelated short stories.

Find out more about the author and his work at LanceErlick.com. Go to the website or sign up [here](#) to receive occasional email newsletters with links to free short stories, and updates on new releases and other writing developments.